

Baptistic Theologies

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2017 Hughey Lectures

Wednesday 18 January 2017 at 2 p.m.

Dr Ian M. Randall

Ian M. Randall is a Senior Research Fellow of IBTSC Amsterdam and Research Associate of the Cambridge Centre for Christianity Worldwide. He is the author of numerous books, including *The English Baptists of the Twentieth Century* (2005), *Rhythms of Revival: The Spiritual Awakening of 1857-1863* (2010), and a study of the Bruderhof Community's spirituality – *Church Community is a Gift of the Holy Spirit* (2014).

He will deliver two lectures on the theme of 'Baptist and Anabaptist Peace Witness: From the First to the Second World Wars'.

Lecture 1

English Baptists and
the Peace Movement

Lecture 2

An Anabaptist
Witness: the
Bruderhof Community



The event will take place in the Chapel of Tyndale Theological Seminary, Egelantierstraat 1, 1171 Badhoevedorp, Amsterdam.

For further information contact David McMillan mcmillan@ibts.eu

While there is no charge for the lectures, those attending will be required to meet their own travel, accommodation, and subsistence costs in Amsterdam.

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Editorial

The particular focus of this edition of *Baptistic Theologies* is Christian Ethics. The first three articles represent the texts of lectures delivered by Dr David P. Gushee, the Distinguished University Professor of Christian Ethics Director, Center for Theology and Public Life at Mercer University. These were delivered in Amsterdam in November 2015 as the IBTSC Nordenhaug lectures. The overall topic was ‘the Sacredness of Human Life’. Although Gushee has written on this topic before in his book *The Sacredness of Human Life: Why an Ancient Biblical Idea is Key to the World’s Future* (2013), he did not want simply to reprise what he said in the book but also to reflect on the things he had learned in subsequent years. We were grateful, therefore, when he agreed to provide us with the texts of the lectures. We have reproduced these lectures as given with only minor editorial changes.

In the first lecture, Gushee discusses the theme of ‘Sacredness in Scripture’. In both the Old and New Testaments he highlights a number features that contribute towards a scriptural understanding of human sacredness. In the Old Testament he concentrates on: Creation and Humanity, God’s Compassionate Care and Liberating Deliverance, Biblical Law and Sacredness, and the Prophetic Demand and Yearning for Shalom. In the New Testament he highlights: the Ministry of Jesus Christ, the Meaning of the Career of Jesus Christ, and the Expansive Reach of the Body of Christ.

In the second lecture, Gushee concentrates on the theme of sacredness in the Christian tradition. The focus here is on the first three centuries of the Christian Church. He identifies the factors which he considers contributed to the maintenance of a distinct Christian moral vision concerning human life during this period. In turn, however, he suggests that this early Christian moral vision sustained foundational damage in the transition to Christendom — damage that would only become fully apparent later.

In the third and final lecture, Gushee discusses a wide number of contemporary issues concerned with the protection and flourishing of human life. In approaching such issues, he maintains that the distinction between more conservative pro-life stances and more liberal social justice issues is artificial and tragic. He contends, rather, that approaching such issues from a sacredness of human life stance offers an approach which overcomes these distinctions in a positive way. He argues:

If each and every human life is of sacred worth, unique and incalculably precious, any issue having to do with the survival, security, and flourishing of large numbers of human beings is a sacredness of life issue. It is also a social justice issue, if we

understand social justice as a commitment to right relations between people, leading to actions that deliver people from oppression and restore them to right relations in community.

While Gushee discusses these issues primarily from the perspective of life and practice in the United States of America, his arguments invite consideration of such and similar issues in our own contexts from a sacredness of life perspective.

The remainder of this Journal comprises three individual articles. Each article discusses an ethical issue concerning which Christians hold different convictions. In response, each author offers their own alternative constructive proposal. These articles were originally presented as papers at the 'Conflicting Convictions' conference held at IBTSC immediately following the Nordenhaug lectures in Amsterdam in November 2015.

Johannes Aakjær Steenbuch, from a historical perspective, considers the debate within Protestant orthodoxy between those 'who affirmed the sovereignty and the predestining election of God on the one hand, and those who affirmed the general scope of the atonement and the freedom of human beings to reject grace on the other'. In contrast to either, and indeed to those who might minimise the differences, he highlights the position of 'biblical universalism' which takes the concern of each side seriously while maintaining in the end that all will be saved not from death but through death. This view he argues is apparent in the writings of such 'baptist' writers as Hans Denck, Georg Klein-Nikolai, and Elhanan Winchester. In discussing these writers, Steenbuch is concerned to move beyond the particular issue to highlight as instructive the theological method of these writers in seeking to resolve conflicts through reconciling rather than denying opposing viewpoints.

Annette Mosher, with reference to the work of Lynn White, Jr., discusses Christian responses to the environment. She does this in the light of the claims that Christian theology based upon the Genesis creation stories lies behind linear understandings of growth and development which have contributed to the abuse of the Earth. She contends that a 'stewardship' approach is insufficient to deal with attitudes and practices of 'domination' because it fails to deal with the fundamental 'above' nature thinking that undergirds the attitudes of domination. Mosher, in offering an alternative, remains in the book of Genesis but moves beyond Genesis 1-4 to Genesis 6-9. She suggests that the earlier curse of the fall upon the Earth is 'washed away' as a new covenant is established between God and the Earth. Viewed in this way, God and the Earth have a covenant which is distinct from and not dependent upon God's dealings with humanity. From the perspective of Christian theology, therefore, the human relationship to the earth should be

one of partnership with ‘sacred earth’ rather than dominion or even stewardship ‘over’.

Michael Peat in his article identifies different Christian responses to ‘the morality of human inherited genetic modification’ (IGM). He argues that paramount in these different responses, as in the secular discourse on the subject, there is a concern for the welfare and dignity of future human ‘individuals’. Peat, however, with reference to Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians, argues that a Christian response to the individual requires giving attention to the nature of the ‘body’ but that the body is something ‘corporate’ and in which diversity is essential. From this perspective Peat cautions against the ‘normalizing’ tendencies of IGM and the potential of economic inequality in relation to its availability. In turn, however, he argues that the presence of ‘weakness’ in a community is ‘necessary’ for its very humanity. Peat does not ‘require that any and all conceivable IGM interventions be rejected’. He argues, however, that this perspective of the corporate body and the vocational significance of weakness offers a different starting point for considering what may be acceptable.

Revd Dr Stuart Blythe
Rector IBTSC Amsterdam

Sacredness and Christian Scripture

David P. Gushee

Introduction

I am grateful for the invitation to give this year's Nordenhaug Lectures. It is indeed a high honour and I am glad to be here with you. In early 2013 I published a rather lengthy book on the concept of the sacredness of human life.¹ I have been asked to speak on three themes addressed in that volume: the biblical grounding of the sacredness of human life, the evolution of the concept in Christian tradition, and applications of the concept to at least a select number of contemporary issues. This is what I will try to do, after a short introduction related to the concept itself.

I hope not simply to reprise what I said in the book but to reflect things I have learned over these three years or so. Probably the major new input into my thinking about the sacredness of human life was participation in a conference on human dignity at Oxford in 2012, together with the resulting extraordinarily rich volume called *Understanding Human Dignity*.² Bringing together secular and religious scholars and practitioners, including philosophers, theologians, legal theorists, and jurists, mainly from the United Kingdom and Europe, that meeting and book have advanced my understanding of the subject and also helped me situate my own work more clearly in relation to that of others doing similar or related work.

Background and Definitions

Several factors motivated me to tackle what became the lengthiest and most involved monograph of my career. One factor was political. I was weary of the use and abuse of sacredness-of-life language in American politics. The term tends to be deployed by conservatives when they want to condemn abortion, usually sometime just before or just after supporting another American war or another execution. It is avoided by liberals as tainted for this reason. I wanted to rescue the term from its discrediting by politics, before it was too late.

Another factor was a residual Protestant impulse. I had noticed that liberal Protestants generally eschewed sacredness language for justice

¹ *The Sacredness of Human Life: Why an Ancient Biblical Idea is Key to the World's Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013).

² Christopher McCrudden, ed., *Understanding Human Dignity* (London and Oxford: British Academy, 2014).

language, and conservative Protestants generally deployed sacredness language as a Catholic borrowing without much reflection. As one long attracted to the idea, and notably the concept of a consistent pro-life ethic,³ I wanted to see if I could make some sense of this concept from a thoughtful and indigenously Protestant theological-ethical frame.

A third factor was more academic. I was thinking like a constructive Christian ethicist. I had long thought the idea that each and every life is of sacred worth a significant ethical norm. I wanted to get to the roots of it; to understand what the idea means and where it comes from; to clarify how it has worked its way through the history of Christian ethics; to see what became of it in the modern era; and to see if I could offer a contemporary articulation of it that offers value to ethical reflection today. Some of these matters will occupy us during this day's lectures. In brief, however, let me outline what I said in the book and will say here:

What 'sacredness of human life' means in Christian tradition is essentially that each and every human being has a highly elevated ascribed worth; for example, we are each and all 'sacred', designated as of unique and ineffable value, with associated very high worth and status; God is the one who makes this ascription, simply by divine prerogative; it is not fundamentally tied to any particular attribute of the human being and cannot be gained or lost by any particular behaviour of the human being — thus, for example, it has nothing to do with anyone's rationality, spirituality, or moral sanctity, or even neediness or potential; it imposes broad and specific moral obligations on each and all of us to act so as to protect and advance human well-being and prevent the desecration of any human being; and it has connections to a broader ethic of sacred creaturely worth and value.

Where the concept comes from is the core sources of Christian theology and ethics, notably the sacred scriptures of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, in particular as these attest to the character of God-in-Christ and God's relationship to humanity. This is the primary topic of this first lecture.

This concept and its practice flourished in early Christianity in grounding a rich, practised communal ethic, and never completely disappeared from our midst; but it became in many ways a minority tradition after the transition to Christendom in the late fourth century and thereafter. This will be the subject of my second lecture.

³ Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, *Completely Pro-Life*; John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, Ron Sider, *Completely Pro-Life*; all were influential texts for me.

After the Enlightenment, at least in western culture it became half-secularized into concepts such as human rights and human dignity, and a separate intellectual lineage developed that can be signalled (French Revolution, Declaration of the Rights of Man, Kantian categorical imperative, Universal Declaration of Human Rights and so on). Initially I argued that human rights and human dignity concepts essentially kept the core moral commitments of the grounding biblical faith that gave rise to the original sacredness-of-life ethic, while gradually dispensing with the theological foundations; then with the likes of Nietzsche both the ethic and the theology were explicitly abandoned. Then the twentieth century saw the tragic outworkings of this abandonment. Now I would narrate various aspects of this history in a somewhat different and more nuanced way.

Today, I believe the sacredness of human life is what the Stassen/Gushee textbook *Kingdom Ethics* would call a ‘basic conviction’ or perhaps a ‘cardinal ethical principle’ that can be applied to a wide range of issues, though rarely can it be said to resolve moral dilemmas on its own; it provides orientation and direction but falters when asked to provide moral rules; or at least is susceptible to interpretations that can produce conflicting moral rules and applications. This is notably the case in relation to sexual ethics and bioethics issues, but one can also see it in relation to issues of violence such as war and capital punishment. This will be addressed in my third lecture. For the remainder of this first lecture I will delve into the stated topic: Sacredness and Christian Scripture.

Sacredness of Life across the Biblical Canon

In my view, four primary elements of the witness of the Old Testament are most important in contributing to the religious-ethical traditions that came to view human life as having great dignity: its creation theology (including but not limited to the *imago dei* theme), its depiction of God’s compassionate care and liberating deliverance, its covenantal/legal materials, and its prophetic vision of a just wholeness (*shalom*) for Israel and all creation in the promised eschatological future. In the New Testament, three primary elements also contribute to a sacredness of human life ethic: the nature of Christ’s ministry, the meaning of the career of Jesus (incarnation, cross, resurrection, ascension), and the ethos and moral vision of the early church as glimpsed in the pages of the New Testament. This lecture will briefly sketch the main contributions of each of these biblical elements to a sacredness-of-human-life ethic in Christianity.

Old Testament

1. Creation and Humanity

Probably the most primal claim of the biblical tradition related to this subject is that human life has dignity because it was created by God. Genesis 1 and 2 tell us that humans do not come from nowhere but are the creative handiwork of God. What is true about humans as creatures of their Creator is also true about all other creatures on the planet, in their own way. Humans are a part of a community of God's earth-creatures; other creatures have divinely ascribed status as well. God is equally the Creator of all humans. The dignity, blessings, and tasks given to human beings are given to all. There is one God who makes one humanity. This is a pivotal element of biblical creation theology, and it contributes at least an implicit primal egalitarianism and unity.

Genesis 2 tells a story in which God begins to create humanity by creating one person first. God creates humankind by creating a first man. The first woman is then formed out of the first man. From these first parents come absolutely everyone else. In this sense we are all kin, all part of one vast human family. We all have the same divine Creator and same earthly forebears.

Genesis 1 and 2 teach a primal human unity and equality. In our origins, we are one race — the human race. There is one universal human family. These claims equalize human status and teach us to value human beings far beyond those most closely connected to us. All are God's creation, all are children of Eve, and all are part of our one human family.

The creation narrative also teaches that human beings are made in the image (and likeness) of God (Genesis 1.28). The theme is echoed and deepened in the New Testament in the category of the image of Christ. However the *imago dei* is understood, few concepts have been more important in elevating and equalizing the status of human beings, birthing a human rights tradition, and dignifying human life.

2. God's Compassionate Care and Liberating Deliverance

The Old Testament reveals a God who cares for humans with deep compassion, for despite our ascribed grandeur we are physically vulnerable creatures, subject to great misery and suffering and deeply vulnerable to oppression. Examples of God's care for his rebellious yet beloved human creatures abound, beginning in Genesis 2 and extending through the whole Bible.

The Bible records that God's universal care for humanity took a more focused form in God's compassionate response to the suffering of God's people Israel when they were enslaved and threatened with the mass murder of their children in Egypt (Exodus 1-15). God's deliverance of the Hebrew people from slavery and infanticide in Egypt profoundly shaped the Jewish people. This founding narrative of God's compassionate deliverance has been fundamental to Jewish life and thought for three thousand years or more. Its echoes resound through later Old Testament writings and in every generation of Jewish life.

This memory instructs Israel as to the character of her God: one who keeps his covenant promises to the chosen people, one who looks with compassionate love on Israel, and one who delivers Israel when it appears that all is lost. God is a God of justice who fights for Israel's liberation when she is victimized. God's character also demands of Israel that her way of life as a people reflect a responsive covenant fidelity, compassionate love, and justice. The concept of a God who demonstrates impartial love for all people is also important to biblical faith. It may seem to stand in contradiction with the idea of a God whose ear inclines especially to the oppressed. But in a sinful and unjust world, justice requires special divine (and human) help for those who cannot help themselves. Some must be lifted up from the dust — even at the price of confrontation — to join the ranks of others who are already blessed with the privilege of standing up straight.

The Exodus narrative of God's deliverance of the suffering Hebrew people deepens our understanding of what it might mean to treat every human life as sacred, as well as what it might cost to do so. It challenges any purely non-coercive or even nonviolent understanding of the means that might have to be employed to protect human life from desecration.

3. Biblical Law and Sacredness

The Old Testament narrative moves from Exodus to Sinai, from God's miraculous deliverance of the covenant people to God's articulation of the laws that shall govern Israel (Exodus 20ff.). Several warrants for a strong sacredness of human life ethic can be noted in biblical law.

The first is that God is the ultimate source of law in Israel, and God holds people accountable for obedience. From Exodus through Deuteronomy the text depicts God as literally dictating the laws that shall govern Israel. There is a profound role given in the Old Testament to teaching a proper fear of God as lawgiver, who holds Israel accountable for compliance with his

laws.⁴ If God is the source of law, then the full weight of God's sovereign majesty and power falls upon the laws thus offered. God's own dignity transfers to the law. The law therefore carries profound holiness and authority. God commands, humans must obey — beginning with Israel, God's chosen people. And there are severe consequences for disobedience.

The very idea that there is a divinely given moral law that governs Israel — and perhaps governs more than Israel — is itself a major contribution to a sacredness-of-human-life ethic. Human moral obligation is ultimately rooted in God's will.⁵ God's revealed will establishes a transcendent reference point by which all life is to be governed and by which all human laws and actions can be evaluated and critiqued.

This elevation of a transcendent legal/moral standard over human life reinforces momentum toward human equality before the law. In many cultures, the ruler defines the law and is above the law. No one in ancient Egypt could hold Pharaoh accountable. But the kings of Israel found that they were indeed accountable to the same divinely given moral law that governed everyone else.

The power of law to level the playing field in human life has the effect of weakening the strong and strengthening the weak. The standard is clear: All stand equal before the law and before those human courts charged with enforcing it. If any member of a particular political community is understood to have moral and legal rights, all have such rights.⁶ In Israel, where law was seen as divinely given, a failure to administer justice to all was treated as a direct affront to the God who authored the law. This is one reason why so much attention is given in biblical law to the functioning of the justice system itself, beginning with the command in the Decalogue against bearing 'false witness' (Exodus 20.16), which clearly has a primary reference to the necessity of truthful testimony in the administration of justice (see Exodus 23.6-8).

The grounding of moral obligation in God's law had a deep impact on the understanding of human law in later cultures. A just society lives not by royal fiat but under the rule of law, and law itself must be anchored in the will of God or it can become cruel and arbitrary. A long tradition of Jewish

⁴ Texts like this one abound: 'In order that the fear of him may be ever with you, so that you do not go astray' (Exodus 20.17). There is a reason people used to be called 'God-fearing'. And a reason they are no longer often called that.

⁵ See Richard J. Mouw, *The God Who Commands* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991); cf. Remi Brague, *The Law of God: The Philosophical History of an Idea*, translated by Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

⁶ The question then becomes who counts as a member of a political-legal community. The first step is to say: 'Every member of this political community stands equal before the law.' The second step is to include more and more people in the agreed political community. Thanks to Sondra Wheeler for reminding me of this critically important point.

and Christian thinking about law developed which came to argue that no human law carries authority if it stands in fundamental contradiction to divine law. This tradition has been harder to sustain as our cultures have secularized.

God's law is an expression of grace and further evidence of God's care, which also has implications for the writing and administration of human law. Simple gratitude on Israel's part will require that love, mercy, and justice must characterize Israel's life as a people and must be felt in her legal system. The motivational wellspring for Israel's obedience to a legal code especially designed to protect the weak will be her constantly reinforced memory of her own hour of desperate weakness and God's mercy on Israel's behalf at that critical hour. That legacy comes forward into other cultures such as many of our own.

4. The Prophetic Demand and Yearning for Shalom

One of the Old Testament's key resources for a sacredness-of-life ethic is found in the demand, and the yearning, for a transformed world of justice and peace. The concept of *shalom* names that state of affairs in which human beings flourish in community and the sacredness of each and every human life is finally honoured. The prophets both demand shalom now and yearn for it then, when the time comes when God finally prevails.

The Old Testament yearning for shalom begins with the particular, especially Israel's experiences of wrenching violence and injustice. Prophets speak about shalom for Israel, from within the cataclysm of war (see, for example, Jeremiah 33). From exile, they speak of the land and people of Israel coming back from the dead (Ezekiel 36-37).⁷ They yearn for a New Jerusalem, from within the experience of Jerusalem's destruction (as in Isaiah 65).

Earlier prophets, prophesying in times when all appeared secure, warned that the violations of shalom within the Jewish community would someday bring upon Israel judgments that she could hardly imagine. Thus the prophetic writings left a legacy both of particularity and universality — they speak to specific events, injustices, and dreams of the Jewish people, while also evoking powerful demands and yearnings on the part of many for the kind of world that they envision.

The narrowest translation for the Hebrew word *shalom* is 'peace', as in the opposite of war, and peace as commonly understood is certainly an ingredient of it. The prophets demand peace from the covenant people Israel when they decry Israel's violence and murder (Micah 7.2-3), and her turn to

⁷ Waldemar Janzen, *Old Testament Ethics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), p.170.

military alliances and military might (cf. Isaiah 31.1; Hosea 1.7; Micah 5.10).⁸ They envision a time when ‘they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks’ (Micah 4.3; Zechariah 9.9-10). Shalom means peace, as in straightforward security from physical threats to bodies, homes, and communities. God promises just such a ‘covenant of peace’ in which threats even from animals no longer exist (Ezekiel 34.25; Isaiah 65.25; Numbers 25.12). Shalom happens when the sixth commandment is obeyed, and people stop murdering each other; but it extends to a time when even ‘legitimate’ killing is no longer undertaken in human life. Security is so complete that ‘your gates shall always be open; day and night they shall not be shut’ (Isaiah 60.11). Eventually, shalom in this sense is so complete that God ‘will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples...he will swallow up death forever’ (Isaiah 25.7).

Taking shalom seriously points us strongly toward what it really means for human beings to flourish. For example, the shalom vision includes the (re)building of community. The prophets speak most often in a particularistic voice but they leave a legacy relevant to all of us. The prophets of the exile, for example, speak of the liberation and return of the dispersed Jewish people (cf. Isaiah 60-61; Jeremiah 16.14-15; Ezekiel 34.11-13; Amos 9.14-15). The slaves, prisoners, and exiles shall be set free at last (Isaiah 61.1). The prophets dream of the rebuilding of a glorious Jerusalem and the return of a growing (Ezekiel 36.10) and vibrant community to Israel’s most important city (Isaiah 61.4; Jeremiah 30.18-22). The people will come back, they will rebuild their homes and public buildings, and they will live securely there, in a newfound unity.

Shalom means inclusive community. Shalom overcomes ethnic divisions as even the ‘foreigner’ who lives in covenant faithfulness to God becomes a full and honoured member of the Jewish community. The eunuch, previously considered inferior and unclean, is also welcomed as a full member of the community (Isaiah 56.3-6). The temple will become ‘a house of prayer for all peoples’ (Isaiah 56.7) as all nations will come to worship God in Jerusalem.⁹ Shalom restores the original unity of humankind, at last.

Shalom means that everyone has enough to eat and drink. Shalom means abundant material well-being and prosperity (Isaiah 60.5-7; 66.12; Jeremiah 31.12; Ezekiel 34.14-15, 29; Joel 2.23-24; Amos 9.13-14; Zechariah 9.17) fairly distributed to all, in a flourishing land of ecological health and well-being (Isaiah 32.15-20; 45:8) that also symbolizes spiritual renewal in Israel.

⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *A Social Reading of the Old Testament: Prophetic Approaches to Israel’s Communal Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), ch.15.

⁹ *Mercer Commentary on the Old Testament* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2003), general eds. Watson E. Mills and Richard F. Wilson, p.613.

Shalom means economic justice — everyone has the means necessary to work successfully to meet their material needs, and no one is permitted to take away from anyone either the means of production (mainly land) or the goods it produces.

Shalom means the healing of broken bodies and spirits: ‘Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy’ (Isaiah 35.5-6a). The sick will be set free to move toward their full human flourishing and their full inclusion in community.

Shalom means both human and divine delight. Shalom means that after endless suffering, humans will receive ‘a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit’ (Isaiah 61.3). Shalom is like a party: ‘Out of [the city] shall come thanksgiving, and the sound of merrymakers’ (Jeremiah 30.19); ‘their children shall see it and rejoice, their hearts shall exult in the Lord’ (Zechariah 10.7).

Finally, shalom means obedience to God. The nations will stream to Jerusalem (Micah 4.1) to worship and serve the one Lord of all: ‘these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer’ (Isaiah 56.7; cf. Zephaniah 3.9).

New Testament

1. The Ministry of Jesus Christ

The Old Testament ends with these glorious promises unfulfilled...But then comes Jesus Christ. Jesus carries forward in profound ways all four themes noted above. He articulates a creation theology affirming God as Creator and God’s sustaining care for human beings, while employing his power over creation to manifest that care in healing, rescuing, and raising people from the dead. He teaches and exemplifies the compassionate deliverance for suffering people that God had exhibited to Israel. He offers a rendering of Jewish legal and ethical norms that affirms and heightens the protections offered there to human life. And he both articulates and embodies the prophetic vision of an eschatological shalom in God’s coming future. An abundance of examples could be cited from the ministry of Jesus to demonstrate the numerous ways in which he teaches and embodies a transformed world in which each and every life is hallowed as God wills. Consider the following:

Jesus' consistent opposition to violence and teaching of the way of peace

A central commitment in the sacredness of human life ethic is to the protection of human life from wanton destruction. Jesus rejects cycles of human violence, despite the abundant provocation to violence that existed for all Jews under Roman occupation.¹⁰ Jesus' earliest disciples saw that violence had no part in the way he had lived and died and thus could not be a part of their own way of life as his followers. This is quite striking, not just because of their context of oppression, but also because of the elements of the Old Testament that permit violence for liberation and against oppression. The early Church, originally an entirely Jewish movement, became convinced that such violence did not fit a community seeking to imitate and obey Jesus.

But Jesus doesn't just say no to violence. He teaches his followers how to find creative alternatives that can bring deliverance from violence. He teaches 'transforming initiatives', such as going the second mile with the Roman soldier's pack, turning the other cheek as an unexpected response to being struck, and taking the first step to make peace by finding one's adversary and beginning the conversation (Matthew 5.23-24, 39, 41).¹¹ He describes God the Father as showering love rather than violence on God's enemies (Matthew 5.43-48), as one who seeks after those who walk away from him (cf. Luke 15).¹² Jesus' harshest words of judgment are reserved for those who turn religion itself into an instrument of violence, judgmentalism, and exclusion (cf. Matthew 23).

Jesus' inclusive ministry

A key element both of the kingdom of God and of sacredness of human life is its expansive inclusiveness, its hospitable universality. Every individual is called, claimed, and welcomed; no groups are diminished vis-à-vis other groups; no categories of people are the privileged recipients of God's love. Everyone matters. Jesus embodies that inclusiveness throughout his ministry. His example pushed Christians toward the development of love for

¹⁰Howard Thurman. His *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1949, 1981) remains deeply influential for me, and helps shape this account.

¹¹On 'transforming initiatives', see Glen H. Stassen, ed., *Just Peacemaking: The New Paradigm for the Ethics of Peace and War* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2008).

¹² On Jesus as peacemaker, and the peacemaking theme in the New Testament, see Joseph A. Grassi, *Jesus is Shalom: A Vision of Peace from the Gospels* (New York: Paulist Press, 2006); Perry B. Yoder and Willard M. Swartley, eds., *The Meaning of Peace: Biblical Studies* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992); Willard M. Swartley, ed., *The Love of Enemy and Nonretaliation in the New Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992); Willard M. Swartley, *Covenant of Peace: The Missing Piece in New Testament Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006); Ulrich Mauser, *The Gospel of Peace: A Scriptural Message for Today's World* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992); Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Love Your Enemies: Discipleship, Pacifism, and Just War Theory* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1994).

‘each and every’ human being, without exception, as a fundamental element of a Christ-following way of life.

In a religious culture in which women were consistently shunted into second-class status, Jesus speaks with women, travels with women, touches and heals women, teaches and ministers to women (cf. Matthew 15.21-28; John 4; 20.15).¹³

In a religious culture in which major religious leaders had developed a reading of Jewish Law which tended to elevate religious separatism in the interest of ritual purity (cf. Matthew 12.1-14; 15.1-20; Mark 7.1-23; Luke 13.10-17), Jesus consistently acts to welcome and care for the ‘impure’ and the ‘unclean’, thus demonstrating a reading of religious obligation that elevates the worth of all people.

In a religious culture in which obvious ‘sinners’ were often treated as beyond the reach of God’s love, Jesus purposefully welcomes such people at his dinner table (cf. Matthew 9.10-13; Luke 5.29-32). He eats with tax collectors and prostitutes! And he teaches many times about God’s welcoming and forgiving love toward those who have been on the wrong path, but repent (cf. Luke 15.11-32; 19.2-9). His ‘open table’ hospitality embodies God’s redemptive love, rather than angry rejection, of those who stray.

In a culture in which children were held of little account, Jesus welcomes and honours children, touches and holds and cares for them (cf. Matthew 18.1-9; 19.13-14; Mark 9.33-40).¹⁴ He teaches his reluctant disciples to welcome rather than reject children.

In a religious context in which the sick and disabled were often cast out from community or blamed as sinfully responsible for their own maladies, Jesus speaks with, touches, and heals thousands of sick ones, attending not only to their physical well-being but also their spiritual needs and their restoration into community (Matthew 4.23-24; 8.16-17).

In a political context in which the occupying Romans were hated, Jesus ministers to and speaks with Roman soldiers, and on one occasion honours a Roman centurion for his great faith (Matthew 8.5-13; Luke 7.1-10). He is somehow able to see in the Roman soldier more than an enemy,

¹³ See Richard L. Bauckham, *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad, 1987); Ben Witherington, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus: A Study of Jesus’ Attitude Toward Women and Their Roles as Reflected in His Earthly Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

¹⁴ Judith M. Gundry-Volf, ‘The Least and the Greatest: Children in the New Testament’, in *The Child in Christian Thought*, edited by Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), ch.1.

and is able to respond to soldiers as individuals loved by God rather than merely as national enemies hated by his people.¹⁵

Against a historic backdrop of tensions between Jews and Samaritans, Jesus speaks with and ministers to a Samaritan woman and through her to her community (John 4). He also elevates a compassionate Samaritan to a memorably praiseworthy role in perhaps his most widely quoted parable (Luke 10.25-37). In so doing Jesus worked to overcome one of the most powerful tensions of his context.

In an economic context in which a woman alone in the world faced desperate financial challenges, Jesus compassionately raises a widow's son from the dead and restores him to his mother, thus restoring her to economic and social well-being (Luke 7.11-17). The profound compassion of this particular story leaves an indelible impression. Jesus' response to the widow who gave her very last penny (Luke 21.1-4) strikes the same chord. His anger at a religious system that would demand that last penny of her (Luke 20.6-47) is also important — to value vulnerable ones means to confront those who exploit them.

In a political context in which social-economic divisions were acute, Jesus 'preached good news to the poor' (Luke 4.18), welcoming the desperate in his band of followers (cf. Matthew 5.1-12). He teaches the rich to share with the poor and live in simplicity rather than to be greedy, to hoard, or to ignore the poor (cf. Matthew 6.19-24; 19.16-24; Luke 12.13-21; 16.19-31). Jesus treats the poor with dignity, proposes a way of life in which everyone has enough and no one has too much, calls the rich and especially the unjust rich to repentance, and creates an egalitarian community of economic sharing and justice.

Jesus' teaching about God's love for human beings

In a variety of different ways, Jesus teaches the very 'good news' that God loves human beings with an immeasurable love. The theme resonates through the pages of the Gospels in a way that has left a profound imprint on the Church.

Jesus declares the divine decision to love us when, for example, he announces the coming reign of God (Matthew 4.17; Mark 1.14-15), which is nothing other than God's loving decision to save humanity and the world rather than leave us to our own destructive devices. Jesus declares that God continues to love humanity, and not just those who return that love but those who reject it (Matthew 5.43-48).

¹⁵ An early, quite sensitive discussion of how Jesus related to Roman soldiers is found in Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*.

Jesus says that God pays attention even to the life of a sparrow, and all the more attends to providing for our material needs—therefore freeing us to trust him and serve others (Matthew 6.26). He describes God as like a loving Father who can be counted on to ‘give good gifts to his children’, which authorizes and encourages us to ask for what we need and trust that it will be given to us (Matthew 7.7-11; Luke 11.13; 18.1-8).

Jesus frequently offers reminders of God’s special care for those who especially need it — the children, the poor, the abandoned, the sick, the hungry. These reminders are often accompanied by teachings requiring all who would be his followers to imitate this preferential love or face judgment for failing to do so (cf. Matthew 25.31-46).

2. The Meaning of the Career of Jesus Christ

Incarnation

‘The Word became flesh and lived among us’ (John 1.14). The Word, which in the beginning was ‘with God’, and ‘was God’ (John 1.1), became human in Jesus the Christ. The New Testament writers consistently marvel at the divine condescension, in which God stooped low to take on our frail, humble flesh, carry our nature, suffer humiliation and death at our hands, and bear our sins as God’s suffering servant (cf. Philippians 2.1-11).

Christian theologians have often been moved to proclaim that if God became human, the status of the human changes. No human can be seen as worthless. No human life can be treated cruelly or destroyed capriciously. The sacredness of human life can never again be rejected, or confined to only a few groups or individuals of supposedly higher rank. The Incarnation elevates the status of every human being everywhere on the planet at any time in human history. It elevates the worth of every human being at every stage of their lives, because the arc of Jesus’ own life included every stage of existence, from conception to death and even resurrection, which is our own destiny in Christ.

There is a paradox here in Christian thought that must not be evaded. Many voices in the Christian tradition find in the Incarnation confirmation of desperate human unworthiness rather than worthiness. But the depth of human sin only highlights the even greater depth of God’s love for humanity. Christian thought proclaims the immeasurable, incalculable value of the human person, not because of any intrinsic goodness on our part, but because God has acted in so many ways to communicate his own immeasurably, incalculably great love for human beings.

The Incarnation forever elevates human bodiliness. What happens to human bodies matters to God and must matter to us. What happens to

people's bodies must matter to us because God came in a body in Jesus Christ. This reality is a powerfully important contributor to Christian sacredness of human life commitments as these relate to the protecting and flourishing of human life, which is always bodily life.

The Cross

The body of Jesus Christ was nailed to a cross. On that cruel Roman cross Jesus suffered and died. The implications of the Cross for the sacredness of human life are abundant. One place to begin is with Christian anguish over Christ's anguish. It is right that Christians should anguish over Christ's anguish—especially if that comes to extend to all who suffer bodily humiliation, suffering, and death. The Cross serves as a resource for honouring life's dignity when it motivates compassionate concern and intervention on behalf of all those who suffer in their bodies.

Jesus' death is always portrayed as an evil. This is a reminder that it is not good that anyone is ever abused or killed. And yet, of course, the New Testament teaches that this particular death somehow brought the salvation of the world. 'By his stripes we are healed' (Isaiah 53.5, KJV). And 'God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son' (John 3.16).¹⁶ God stopped at nothing to reach out to us. God-in-Christ suffered and bled and died for us. What more could God do to demonstrate love for the world? Belief in the sacredness of human life is deepened considerably by reflection on the ultimate nature of the price God paid at the Cross.

The Resurrection

And then Christ rose again. It is significant that Christ rose in a body. It was a new, different kind of body. But it was still a body. This was a body that could be seen and touched. In this body Jesus ate and drank. Human life never ceases to be bodily, even at the resurrection. Christians never escape embodiment and its implications.

The resurrection of Christ also signifies the victory of God over evil, including the evil that took Jesus to the Cross. In the Resurrection, God signals that in the end he will triumph over Satan and all forces that bring suffering and death; even death itself is destroyed (1 Corinthians 15.25).¹⁷

¹⁶It is worth pointing out that Christians who love their lives often have been willing to lay them down if that is what fidelity to Christ requires. Christian martyrs such as these help clarify that what matters ultimately in Christian perspective is faithfulness to Christ. This does involve a proper valuing of our own and others' embodied lives. But it may involve a willingness to sacrifice our own life, as Jesus did.

¹⁷ I first encountered this formulation in J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980). Since then it has become a familiar concept, linked to the kingdom of God.

The sacredness of human life, when fully realized, will be part of this ultimate victory of God over the evil that has harmed and destroyed so many human lives.

The Resurrection marks the triumph of life. In the Resurrection, Jesus lives again; God wins; and therefore life wins. God is for life.¹⁸ This demands that God's people participate in combating and with God's help defeating all that wars against life until Christ comes again.

The Ascension

The historic confession of the Church is not just that Jesus rose from the dead, but that he ascended to heaven, where he now sits at the right hand of the Father, and from which he shall come to judge the living and the dead.

God stoops low so that humanity can be exalted even to the right hand of God. Human beings must be viewed and treated as those whose divinely intended destiny is to dwell eternally along with Jesus the Son in the presence of God the Father. Humanity was made for an eternal destiny. Those who belong to Jesus Christ will follow him to the throne of God.

3. The Expansive Reach of the Body of Christ

The Book of Acts depicts a rapidly growing church led by the Holy Spirit toward an ever-more inclusive and hospitable community ethos. What had initially been a 'Hebrew' Jewish community of Christ-followers rapidly expands to include large numbers of 'Hellenists', that is, Greek-speaking Jewish Christians (Acts 6.1). The Jew/non-Jew barrier is shattered as the Gospel is taken to Gentiles.

Paul offers the most expansive theological effort to defend this revolutionary transformation of relationships between Jews and Gentiles. 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3.28). Christ 'has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall...the hostility between us' (Ephesians 2.14).¹⁹ If even Jews and Gentiles can now be 'one new humanity' (Ephesians 2.15), other distinctions can and must also fall — between male and female,²⁰ slave or free, and so

¹⁸ This theme has perhaps never been expressed more profoundly than by Pope John Paul II, in *The Gospel of Life* (New York: Times Books, 1995), ch.II.

¹⁹ New Testament scholars continue to argue about Pauline authorship of Ephesians, but do see deep Pauline influence in this epistle.

²⁰ The literary witness of the early church shows that it did not fully eliminate the second-class status of women as found in Judaism and the Greco-Roman world, but it did make real progress in that direction. Women's dramatic inclusion in communities of early Christians did not eliminate questions about, and differences regarding, leadership roles in the life of the church (cf. 1 Corinthians 11.3-10, 14.33; 1 Timothy

on. In Christ, God has begun to reclaim this divided world and to bring peace to its warring members through Jesus Christ.

The early church's ecstatic experience of the Holy Spirit, poured out upon both sons and daughters, young and old, slave and free (Acts 2.17-18), combined with its Spirit-led decision to shatter the Jew-Gentile boundary line, combined also perhaps with the special appeal of its message to those most powerless and vulnerable, created powerful momentum toward a radically inclusive and egalitarian community. This would be a community that would not accept the dehumanization and degradation of any category of people, as occurred all around it in the Greco-Roman world.

What ultimately emerged were congregations that believed that in their own experience of transformed human relations lay the beginnings of the redemption of the world. Their leaders addressed them with such seriousness on these points because so very much was at stake. These communities would seek to live in love toward one another and to all. They would contribute only good to their neighbours — beginning with their near neighbours in Christian community but extending far beyond 'the household of faith'. They would do so until Christ returned. This communal ethos formed a powerful foundation for an ethic of the sacredness of human life in Christianity that lived on in the post-New Testament period and continues to this day.

2.11-15), nor did it create a fully or universally egalitarian understanding of male and female roles in marriage (Ephesians 5.21-33; Colossians 3.18-19), though it did soften the hard edges of patriarchalism. The literature on this issue is vast. One especially valuable work is Craig S. Keener, *Paul, Women and Wives* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992). My view of what the New Testament says is found in Stassen and Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics*, ch.15.

Sacredness and Christian Tradition

David P. Gushee

Introduction

As our gaze extends beyond the New Testament, the evidence for a sacredness of human life ethic on the part of the early Christians remains quite strong. Those Christian leaders who sought to instruct Christians on the nature of their way of life, or who sought to defend Christian morality against critics, left numerous traces of this vision. In what follows, I will offer a number of representative quotations from a diverse array of the early church's leaders, serving all over the Graeco-Roman world.¹ These will give us a significant glimpse into the moral vision church leaders sought to imprint on the faithful. We will find that this vision was breathtakingly holistic in its valuing of human life. In the last part of this lecture we will seek to understand how the early church retained its distinctive moral vision over three centuries, and consider at least one interpretation of how it eroded during and after the transition to Christendom.

Against Participation in War

The earliest Christians were instructed repeatedly by numerous key leaders that killing is forbidden to followers of Christ, and these instructions had their effect. Christian non-participation in the Roman military and resistance to the evils of war was one result. Philip Wogaman reflects the scholarly consensus when he claims that 'no Christian is known to have served in the imperial armies until about AD 170',² though after that the situation was more mixed, as were the pastoral responses.³

¹When possible, primary sources are cited in the text from the *Ante-Nicene Fathers* collection, edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1885). Hereafter ANF, title, volume, page. Other primary texts are footnoted.

² J. Philip Wogaman, *Christian Ethics: A Historical Introduction* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), p.32. The question becomes more complex later, as gradually some Christians did serve in the Roman military, even before the conversion of Constantine. There were, for example, military martyrs in the church in the early fourth century. For competing perspectives on the evidence, see Frances M. Young, 'The Early Church: Military Service, War and Peace', *Theology* 92 No.750 (November 1, 1989): p.491; and Alan Kreider, 'Rediscovering Our Heritage: The Pacifism of the Early Church', in Jim Wallis, ed., *Waging Peace* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), p.122. These sources and others offer considerable discussion not just about whether, how, and why Christians served in the Roman military but about the factors that affected their decision making about this critical issue.

³ Summarizing recent research, Kirk MacGregor argues that it is relatively noncontroversial to now assert that 'no Christians served in the military or assumed government offices' from the close of the New

Still, no early church leader rested easy with Christian involvement in government (with its use of violence), military service, and especially warfare, and for most of early church history all three were forbidden to Christians. Consider the exhortations offered by some of the early church's most revered leaders:

We who were filled with war, and mutual slaughter, and every wickedness, have each through the whole earth changed our warlike weapons — our swords into ploughshares, and our spears into implements of tillage — and we cultivate piety, righteousness, philanthropy, faith, and hope.

Justin Martyr (100-165), *Dialogue with Trypho*, ANF 1:254.⁴

For we must delightfully come to the counsels of Jesus by cutting down our hostile and impudent swords into plowshares and transforming into pruning-hooks the spears formerly employed in war. So we no longer take up the sword against nations, nor do we learn war anymore, since we have become children of peace, for the sake of Jesus, who is our leader.

Origen (185-254), *Against Celsus*, ANF 4:558.⁵

For since we...have learned from His teaching and His laws that evil ought not to be requited with evil, that it is better to suffer wrong than to inflict it, that we should rather shed our own blood than stain our hands and our conscience with that of another, an ungrateful world is now for a long period enjoying a benefit from Christ, inasmuch as by His means the rage of savage ferocity has been softened, and has begun to withhold hostile hands from the blood of a fellow-creature.

Arnobius (ca. 300), *Against the Heathen*, ANF 6:415.

This obviously does not resolve all contemporary moral issues for Christians related to involvement in government or military service. But the church's earliest practice must be taken seriously.

Against the Aborting and Killing of Infants

Absolute loyalty to Jesus requires abstaining not only from war but also from abortion, abandonment of infants ('exposure'), and direct infanticide.⁶ These

Testament era until 174 CE, and that after 174, 'the ancient church treated those Christians who played such roles, including previous office-holders who converted, with great suspicion'. Kirk R. MacGregor, 'Nonviolence in the Ancient Church and Christian Obedience', *Themelios* Vol.33:1 (2008), pp.16-17.

⁴ MacGregor points out that Justin Martyr is probably referencing a large number of conversions from paganism to Christianity that had occurred among Roman soldiers. These soldiers had risked everything to leave the army and join the church. MacGregor, p.18.

⁵ Translation by MacGregor, 'Nonviolence in the Ancient Church and Christian Obedience', p.24.

⁶ Robin Lane Fox has written, 'Like the Jews, Christians opposed much in the accepted practice of the pagan world. They vigorously attacked infanticide and the exposure of children.' Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), p.351. See also Michael J. Gorman, *Abortion and*

were quite common practices in the Graeco-Roman world, and had especially devastating effects on women and female children.⁷ Under Roman law, the father was essentially granted absolute power to kill, abandon, or sell his child or to order any female in his household to abort, which involved primitive methods that often ended women's lives or ruined their health.⁸ But for Christians, the child's life too, was sacred, even in the womb and in infancy, as was the life of the woman carrying the child. For both Jews and Christians, abortion and infanticide were absolutely banned.⁹ Here are a few of the many surviving Christian texts:

Practice no magic, sorcery, abortion, or infanticide.

The Didache.¹⁰

We say that those women who use drugs to bring on an abortion commit murder, and will have to give an account to God for the abortion...[for we] regard the very fetus in the womb as a created being, and therefore an object of God's care...and [we do not] expose an infant, because those who expose them are chargeable with child-murder.

Athenagoras (ca. 177), *A Plea for the Christians*, ANF 2:147.

Against Judicial Torment and Killing

This opposition to bloodshed was comprehensive in the early church. It extended to all forms of killing, even capital punishment, which was one reason for opposition to service in the military and in the government, both of which employed the death penalty:

We cannot endure even to see a man put to death, though justly.

Athenagoras, *A Plea for the Christians*, ANF 2:147.

Note the mention of other horrendous features of the criminal 'justice' system in this statement by Tertullian — including torture:

Shall it be held lawful to make an occupation of the sword, when the Lord proclaims that he who uses the sword shall perish by the sword? And shall the son of peace take part in the battle when it does not become him even to sue at law? And shall he apply the chain, and the prison, and the torture, and the punishment, who is not an avenger even of his own wrongs?

Tertullian (160-225), *The Chaplet*, ANF 3:99.

the Early Church: Christian, Jewish, and Pagan Attitudes in the Greco-Roman World (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1998).

⁷ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), p.97.

⁸ Stark, p.120.

⁹ Josephus, quoted in Stark, p.124.

¹⁰ Probably dated to the late first century. See Maxwell Staniforth and Andrew Louth, translators and editors, *Early Christian Writings: The Apostolic Fathers* (London: Penguin Books, 1987), p.191.

Against the Mayhem of the Arenas

Early Christian writings also took aim at the bloody spectacle of the gladiator games, and at eating the meat of slaughtered animals:

Do such exhibitions as these redound to your credit? He who is chief among you collects a legion of blood-stained murderers, engaging to maintain them; and these ruffians are sent forth by him, and you assemble at the spectacle to be judges...and he who misses the murderous exhibition is grieved, because he was not doomed to be a spectator of wicked and impious and abominable deeds. You slaughter animals for the purpose of eating their flesh, and you purchase men to supply a cannibal banquet for the soul, nourishing it by the most impious bloodshedding.

Tatian (110-172), *To the Greeks*, ANF 2:75.

For Love without Partiality

Christian leaders instruct their followers not only to refrain from killing, but in humility¹¹ to love all without partiality, as God is without partiality. Jesus was recognized even by his critics as one who ‘shows deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality’ (Matthew 22.16).¹² In a society torn by social status distinctions, here was the germ of a Christian social revolution which elevated the status of the poor, enemies, women, children, the sick, those considered ugly, the enslaved, and all who stood at the bottom of the social hierarchy. This is part of the earliest meaning of the Christian sacredness-of-life ethic.

See then, dear friends, what a great and wondrous thing love is. Its perfection is beyond all words. Who is fit to be called its possessor, but those whom God deems worthy? Let us beg and implore of his mercy that we may be purged of all earthly preferences for this man or that, and be found faultless in love.

Clement of Rome (30-100), *First Epistle to the Corinthians*.¹³

It is not by ruling over his neighbors, or by seeking to hold the supremacy over those that are weaker, or by being rich, and showing violence towards those that are inferior, that happiness is found; nor can anyone by these things become an imitator of God...On the contrary he who takes upon himself the burden of his neighbor; he who, in whatever respect he may be superior, is ready to benefit another who is deficient; he who, whatsoever things he has received from God,

¹¹ Robin Lane Fox points out the revolutionary nature of the early Christian emphasis on voluntary humility in a pagan culture which heretofore had never considered humility a virtue, but instead an aspect of being ignoble, low, or unworthy. See Fox, p.324.

¹² Note the link between humility and being ‘no respecters of persons’. Christians were to view neither themselves nor anyone else as ‘higher’ or ‘lower’ than others. See Robert Bruce Mullin, *A Short World History of Christianity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), p.39. Compare Paul Hanly Furfey, ‘Social Action in the Early Church, 30-180 A.D.’, *Theological Studies* Vol.2:2 (1941): p.90.

¹³ In Staniforth and Louth, *Early Christian Writings*, p.43.

by distributing these to the needy becomes a god to those who receive; he is an imitator of God.

Epistle to Diognetus (c. 130), ANF 1:29.

Rodney Stark offers an apt summary of the picture available from these Christian documents:

Perhaps above all else, Christianity brought a new conception of humanity to a world saturated with capricious cruelty and the vicarious love of death...Christians effectively promulgated a moral vision utterly incompatible with the casual cruelty of pagan custom...[W]hat Christianity gave to its converts was nothing less than their humanity.¹⁴

I think it is more than fair to describe this ethic as a seamless, holistic commitment to the sacred worth of every person.

How Early Christianity Retained Its Moral Vision

The attractiveness of this way of life against the backdrop of the available alternatives contributed to the rapid expansion of Christianity in the late third century and finally to its fateful adoption by the Emperor Constantine and his successors. My task in the remainder of this talk is to consider whether there were factors ‘wired in’ to early Christianity that enabled it to retain this distinctive character. I propose the following four factors that seem most significant:

1. Their interpretation of reality within the Jewish-Christian narrative framework of the reign of God, and their attempt to embody that reality in the churches

Justo González rightly emphasizes that the earliest Christians did not see themselves as founding a new religion but as celebrating God’s fulfillment of his long-awaited promise to redeem Israel.¹⁵ Primitive Christianity began as a species of Jewish prophetic religion, and emerged on a kind of parallel track to other forms of Jewish eschatological religion swirling about during this dramatic period in Jewish and world history.¹⁶ Christians believed themselves to be living through the joyful fulfillment of Israel’s covenant with God, most crucially the promise of a God-sent Messiah. In Christ the reign of God had broken in, and not just Israel but the whole world was being redeemed.

¹⁴ Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, pp.214-215.

¹⁵ González, *Story of Christianity*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2014), p.31.

¹⁶ This is now widely recognized — a nice fairly early statement of the issue is in Dawson, *Formation of Christendom*, pp.93-110.

This kingly reign of God proclaimed and inaugurated by Jesus was at least initially understood to be a concrete reality in which the world actually begins to be characterized by justice, peace, and the deliverance of the oppressed rather than its oppressive daily injustice, violence, and bondage.¹⁷ The fact that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ by no means brought an end to the world's evils led to a focus not just on the return of Christ but also on the quality of Christian moral living. A robust countercultural, or even counter-worldly, ecclesiological practice became theologically necessary, or else the kingdom claims of Jesus and his earliest followers could not be sustained. This expectation for the role of the church both required and created the theological space for the evolution of churches into alternative communities which in their life embodied the evidence of God's reign.

2. The looming centrality of their beloved Jesus, his teachings and example

The New Testament and later writings of the early church are suffused by the impact of Jesus Christ. Almost all of the earliest Christian teaching documents contain numerous allusions to the teachings and examples of Jesus. It is not accidental that communities steeped in Jesus' teachings would become committed to advancing the vision announced there: the steadfast rejection of violence, the tender care for children, the welcoming inclusion of 'sinners', the weak, the ill, women, gentiles, and servants, the resolute impartiality and fearlessness in the face of hierarchies of power, and above all the command to love God and neighbour with every fibre of one's being (cf. Matthew 22.34-40).¹⁸

Everything that Jesus taught he also exemplified. The powerful congruence between Jesus' life and his teachings intensified the impact of both. The teachings could be read in light of the life and the life in light of the teachings, and both blazed the trail for the believers to follow. Jesus had incarnated his teachings and thus demonstrated the possibility and path of that embodiment for others. Early Christians were called to imitate Jesus, not just obey him.¹⁹

And this was a Jesus who was loved, not just imitated. Here was a Saviour to be loved, not just a teacher of Truths, founder of a Religion, or

¹⁷ Frend, *The Early Church*, p.47, says the Bar Kochba revolt killed Jewish apocalyptic and affected Christian apocalyptic as well.

¹⁸ Mullin, *Short World History*, p.39, says it is love that truly sets Christian teaching about both God and ethics apart from paganism. Wogaman, *Christian Ethics*, p.35, and Bainton, *Christian Attitudes Toward War and Peace*, p.77, concur.

¹⁹ Richard A. Burridge, *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

centre of a Faith. He was adored, worshipped, cherished, and clung to; he was alive, more real than any other reality. The power of this personal attachment to a beloved and living Jesus must not be underestimated.

3. Their carefully maintained distance from Graeco-Roman culture and its practices and concurrent protection of Christian identity

Graeco-Roman writers attacked both Jews and Christians for their social distancing strategies, which both groups found necessary to protect their distinctive identity amidst Greek and later Roman cultural hegemony.²⁰ For Christians, this social distancing was pivotal in enabling the formation of communities which remembered their primary loyalty to Jesus Christ and primary narrative of the kingdom of God. It was not just that the Christians sought to avoid participation in the pervasive Graeco-Roman religious associations, public rituals, and worship practices; they sought to avoid acculturation to the broader Graeco-Roman way of life insofar as it contradicted Christian identity.²¹ This distancing began when Christianity was primarily a Jewish movement and reflected the views and strategies long held by Diaspora Judaism. But it continued when the transition to a primarily gentile Christianity occurred.²²

Navigating the currents of Graeco-Roman society through such social distancing required structures of community discipline to define and preserve Christian identity. One aspect of this discipline was the extraordinarily careful and lengthy preparation process for catechumens before entry into the Christian community. Once having been initiated into the community through such a disciplined process, believers were held there through not only personal loyalty but also ongoing structures of discipline and accountability.²³ It is not coincidental that early church writings, beginning with the New Testament, describe and commend internal processes for the correction of believers seen as straying from Christ's Way (Matthew 18.12-15; 1 Corinthians 5; Galatians 6.1; James 5.20). Protection of doctrinal and moral purity preoccupies church leaders throughout the

²⁰ Great discussion of these religious identity challenges first in Judaism and beginning with the Greeks can be found in Kee et. al., *Christianity*, ch.1.

²¹ Luke Timothy Johnson points out how very difficult it was to participate in any way in the life of Graeco-Roman society without encountering the religious symbols, practices, and institutions of 'the deeply enmeshed religious associations' of that society. Johnson, *Among the Gentiles: Greco-Roman Religion and Christianity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), p.23.

²² Differences over how much distancing to maintain were of course endemic, as they are today. Consider the struggles discussed in 1 Corinthians as a signal example.

²³ Johnson points out that both Greek and Jewish religious and philosophical movements offer examples of similar structures involving extensive probation periods, rigorous discipline, and excommunication. So we must not posit an airtight sealing off of Christianity from other religious traditions in the way they went about initiating, training, and retaining adherents, and even, at times, in the content of moral instruction. Johnson, *Among the Gentiles*, pp.25-31.

period we are considering. The pattern surfaces powerfully in relation to violence. Church leaders either refused to readmit to full communion in the church believers guilty of shedding blood or required a rigorous process of repentance and rehabilitation.²⁴ Church discipline of such rigour became central to the emerging ecclesiastical structures and their leaders as early as the late first century.²⁵ Such rigorism has its downsides. But it helped to ensure the integrity of the distinctive Christian way of life attested here.

4. Their searing experience of persecution at Roman hands

Evidence from early Christian writings reveals a measure of respect for the general benefits of Roman rule, such as the maintenance of order and suppression of crime and piracy. This kind of general appreciation of divinely-given and evangelistically providential Roman order may lie behind texts like Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2.13-17, which counsel submission to government authority. That strand of thought remains visible in the Christian teaching offered in the period we are considering.²⁶ These kinds of texts apparently were most often written during periods in which the Roman state was not harassing the church.

On the other hand, and entirely to be expected, the sporadic experience of imperial, provincial, local, and mob violence against Christians evoked a theological-political-ethical strand of contempt for the violence of Roman government and Graeco-Roman culture.²⁷ One might say that the Book of Revelation strand, with Rome as bloody anti-Christ, could not disappear from Christianity as long as such hostility and persecutions endured, with an appeal directly related to the viciousness of those persecutions at any given time.²⁸

Thus Christopher Dawson is correct in saying that ‘from the beginning the pressure of external hostility and persecution [on the church] was so great that it provided a natural barrier that separated the Christians from the rest of the Roman world’.²⁹

²⁴ MacGregor documents this. See ‘Nonviolence in the Ancient Church and Christian Obedience’, pp.22-23.

²⁵ Mullin, *Short World History*, pp.26-27, 41-42. He writes (p.41): ‘The Christian community was constructed as a tightly knit fellowship, with strong and fixed boundaries between inside and outside.’

²⁶ Bainton, *Christian Attitudes Toward War and Peace*, p.74.

²⁷ Fox argues that most persecutions of Christians were local until at least the 250s, and that imperial authority was sometimes employed to protect Christians rather than attack them. Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, pp.422-423.

²⁸ A very helpful discussion of Revelation as shaping Christian ethos and practice can be seen in Wayne A. Meeks, *the Moral World of the First Christians* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), pp.143-147.

²⁹ Dawson, *Formation of Christendom*, p.105.

As with earlier Jewish martyrs to pagan tyranny, Christian theology, identity, and community loyalty in these early centuries were deeply affected by the experience of persecution and periodic martyrdom.³⁰ Among other effects, persecution required Christians to count the cost of affiliation and thus helped screen the casual out of the church. It helped believers identify even more closely with Jesus the persecuted. It seemed to confirm the truth of the biblically recorded warnings that his true followers would suffer for their faithfulness (cf. Matthew 5.10-12). It elevated martyr-heroes of courage and steadfastness whom later believers could emulate along with Jesus. Persecution forged a Christian memory of the dead that deepened identification with and loyalty to the church for all who persevered. Most germane to our purposes, it stiffened the spine of the church against any temptation to assimilate to Graeco-Roman culture. And it might well have helped the church to remain crystal clear about its commitment to affirm and protect life in the teeth of such brutality, torture, and killing. That is, it did so at least until the era when Christians themselves found uses for state power and violence.³¹

The Fateful Transition to Christendom

From 100 to 300 CE, according to Rodney Stark's well-known estimate, the Christian movement grew from 7,500 souls to 6.3 million, at an average growth rate of 40 per cent per decade. Christians had gone from a tiny flyspeck on Rome's periphery to ten per cent of the entire population of the Empire. By 300, Christians could be found almost everywhere in the Empire, from Britain to India, from northern Europe to Sudan. By 350, nearly forty years after the Emperor Constantine's conversion to Christianity, the number of Christians had grown to 33 million and represented over half of the Empire's population.³²

By any customary measure, Christian faith had succeeded. A small, marginal, often persecuted church had become the dominant religious community of the vast Roman Empire, and in fact spread far beyond the Empire. And its numerical dominance was soon enough matched by a political rise to power that took the Church from outlaw group to tolerated minority to established state religion in a mere seventy years. Great success

³⁰ Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, pp.436-437, points out the precedent of Jewish martyrdom, especially in the Maccabean period, and some similarities in the role of martyrdom in both traditions.

³¹ In David Gushee, *Righteous Gentiles of the Holocaust*, 2nd edition (Minneapolis: Paragon House, 2003), I argue that the remembered experience of religious persecution served some Christian communities during the Nazi era quite powerfully both to encourage resistance to the Holocaust and to discourage any seductions from Nazism or its collaborators.

³² Rodney Stark, *Rise of Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), p.7. It should be noted that Stark's estimates are disputed and cannot be taken as conclusive.

— and yet, many Christian scholars have argued that this burst of numerical and political success was one of the worst things that ever happened to the Christian movement. These scholars essentially claim that the Church gained the whole world but lost its soul. Another band of scholars strongly dissents from this judgment.

My own view is that ‘the interweaving of the two traditions [Roman imperial and Christian] change[d] both of them in ways that would prove impossible to undo’.³³ The decision of Constantine and most of his successors, notably Theodosius, to embrace Christianity produced numerous worldly benefits for Christianity. It legally empowered and privileged the Church, established its symbols and calendar as central to the state, motivated a huge numerical increase in adherents, and dramatically heightened the power of church officials. In turn the Roman imperial state had gained a temporary resource for unity. It was purged of many of its worst practices. And it gained a powerful new religious interpretation of its meaning and purpose. Church leaders began describing the Roman Empire as ‘the kingdom of God on earth’,³⁴ a way of interpreting political realities that long outlived the Roman Empire itself.

Fifteen years after the death of Theodosius, in 410, the ancient city of Rome was sacked by Visigoths. The Roman Empire fell into tribal fragmentation. Any semblance of order and unity in the various realms was provided by the surviving Catholic Church, which thenceforth carried forward both Roman and Christian cultural values and traditions.³⁵ The eastern Empire survived another thousand years, anchored in Constantinople and deeply rooted in the understanding of Christendom pioneered by Constantine, deepened by Theodosius, and finally intensified by Justinian (527-565), whose autocratic rule as ‘representative of Christ on earth’ took the marriage of Church and state to a new level.³⁶ That state-dominated model of Christendom³⁷ remained prevalent throughout the later Eastern Orthodox world until overturned by revolutionary political developments in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and then resurfacing again in the post-Communist era.

³³ Susan Wise Bauer, *History of the Medieval World* (New York: Norton, 2010), p. 57.

³⁴ Bauer, *History of the Medieval World*, p.49.

³⁵ Bauer, *History of the Medieval World*, p.173. Unity: Consider the example of Clovis, first king of all the Franks, who converted to Christianity in 496, which would thenceforth ‘serve as the new glue of the Frankish nation’. Thus Catholic France was born. Order: Pope Gregory (Gregory the Great, 590-604) organized food distribution in Rome, repaired the aqueducts, supervised the rebuilding of the military and even negotiated for peace with the Lombards. González, *Story of Christianity*, p.246.

³⁶ Bauer, *History of the Medieval World*, pp.200-201.

³⁷ González, *Story of Christianity*, p. 251. See also Jeffrey Burton Russell, *A History of Medieval Christianity* (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1968), p.35.

Moral Damage at the Foundations

The earliest Christian moral vision sustained foundational damage in the transition to Christendom — damage whose full consequences became visible only later. Every one of the factors that had safeguarded the identity and vision of early Christianity was damaged during the transition from Constantine to Theodosius. Without going into deep detail, I claim the following:

1. The Christian narrative framework changed.

The earliest Christians inhabited an apocalyptic Jewish narrative in which the coming of Jesus the Messiah initiated the eschatological events leading to the ultimate consummation of God's reign, beginning with Israel and extending to the whole world. That divine reign, in turn, was an already/not yet reality with specific characteristics such as deliverance, justice, peace, inclusive community, healing, and the joyful experience of God's presence, all embodied by Jesus himself. While awaiting Christ's return, the Church sought (and was called) to embody God's reign through a way of life committed to treating every human being as sacred, and the truthfulness of the Christian message required evidence in the Church's own moral practices.

As Jaroslav Pelikan has pointed out, the indefinite delay of Christ's return meant that 'it could no longer serve as the premise for the affirmations of Christian doctrine, which had to be transposed into another key'.³⁸ This problem presented itself to Christian thought long before the period we have been considering. Literary evidence available in Christian writings shows a variety of exegetical and theological strategies deployed to address the issue. These ranged from a millenarian teaching that Christians should expect Christ to return and to initiate a thousand-year reign on earth (Papias, Irenaeus), to spiritualizations of the millennium as having to do not with the body but with the soul (Origen), to the 'decisive shift from the categories of cosmic drama to those of being' that were articulated in the creeds of the fourth century.³⁹

Perhaps the latter development would have occurred in any case. But it is at least interesting that the codification of Christian doctrine that began in Constantine's era and was carried forward by later emperors cemented a shift in the focus of Christian thought toward a Platonic ontology of being rather than a Hebraic historical drama. One result was to strip the kingdom

³⁸ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, Vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p.123.

³⁹ Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, pp.123-132.

of God of its original dynamic framework rooted in Jewish eschatology. Now the ‘kingdom of God’ could denote almost anything else other than its original Hebraic meaning. It could be identified with the earthly reign of Roman emperors who claimed belief in Christ or who favoured the Church. The thousand-year reign of Revelation 20 could be identified with the Church triumphant in its new political symbiosis with the state, or with the (Christian) state itself. The triumph of God in human life, which had included a final end to violence, could be viewed as no longer partial and awaiting God’s decisive final intervention, but as fulfilled through God’s intervention on behalf of violent earthly Christian rulers such as Constantine, Theodosius, and Justinian — and their successors. It could be seen as confirmed whenever a Christian ruler gained a victory in battle or bestowed a favour on the Church. When violence moved from being a mark of the need for God’s kingdom to a mark of God’s kingdom, there indeed was a dramatic negation of Christianity’s original moral vision.

The Church’s top thinkers got into the act. Eusebius (260-339), the early Church’s most influential historian, declared Constantine to be God’s ‘Commander in Chief’, put forward ‘as a lesson in the pattern of godliness to the human race’, his victories clearly the product of divine providence, his triumph the triumph of God, his enemies the enemies of God.⁴⁰ With the present political order in good hands, Christians could transfer their remaining eschatological hopes to their own personal resurrection, a pressing concern in a world where illness and death loomed as such constant threats.⁴¹ In short, Jesus’ apocalyptic Hebraic eschatology originally involving the inaugurated-but-not-consummated transformation of the world was subsumed into a fulfilled eschatology around a Christian state/established Church (especially one expanding in power) and a heightened theology of personal salvation. These patterns of thought lived on, and remain with us to this day in many Christian communities.

It should also be noted that identifying God’s reign with the reign of Rome (and later Byzantium) damaged the spread of God’s actual reign to any realm not politically allied with Rome or its successor states. Rome was not in fact universal, and so to identify God’s reign with Rome’s realm was both theologically mistaken and politically dangerous. One example of this problem is seen in the precarious status of Christianity in the Persian Empire in the third to fifth centuries. Christians who had once been tolerated were often persecuted when Persian leaders came to identify Christianity with Rome. A precedent was set: Roman and Byzantine Christians tangled violently with Persian Zoroastrians on the eastern edge of the Roman

⁴⁰ Quoted in Mullin, *Short World History*, p.62. See Eusebius, *The History of The Church*, trans. G.A. Williamson (London: Penguin, 1965), Book 10, especially pp.328-333.

⁴¹ González, *Story of Christianity*, p.134.

Empire; European Christians tangled violently with Arab Muslims through much of Europe, Africa, and the Middle East; and indigenous Arab or other Christians outside the 'Christian West' remain hugely vulnerable.⁴² If 'Christianity' meant 'Roman Empire' or 'European Christian states', it was easy to treat the Christian faith as a political entity that was an enemy to every other tribe or kingdom in the world. The after-effects of this problem remain with us to this day.

2. The role played by Jesus changed, from teacher/exemplar to object of religious dogma and its enforcement.

The earliest Christian writings reveal an extraordinarily sharp focus on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Christians were repeatedly taught to imitate his life and obey his teachings. The Sermon on the Mount played an especially visible role in early Christian moral exhortations. Early Christian commitment to nonviolence in such a desperately violent world offers the best example of a faith community transfixed by the example of its source and head, its Saviour and Lord. To say 'Jesus Christ is Lord' meant not just or even primarily that Jesus Christ reigned in the heavens but also that Jesus Christ set the pattern by which his followers were committed to live. This example was powerful enough to lead the Church to resist both the holy violence of large sections of the Old Testament and the imperial violence of the *Pax Romana*. The Church was a different kind of community, following a different way of living.

Perhaps it was inevitable that by three centuries after the end of Christ's earthly ministry his followers would instead be fixated on determining questions such as how to understand the exact nature of his divinity or how his human and divine natures were transmitted and related to each other. Such questions were not entirely new. The intellectual credibility of Christianity eventually required their resolution. The Roman emperors did not create such disputes, but they intervened and used their earthly power in attempts to resolve them once and for all. And a day spent arguing about fine points of dogma related to the Person of Christ was a day not spent focusing on how to live out the moral teachings of the Jesus whose words are recorded in the New Testament, which enabled their primacy to slip further from view. A pattern was established that continues today: followers of Christ could grotesquely violate the moral teachings of Christ in the name of defining and enforcing the tiniest points of doctrine about Christ. The actual teachings and example of Jesus could be evaded without

⁴² Bauer, *History of the Medieval World*, ch.12.

anyone really noticing it, because they had ceased to be central to standard understandings of Christianity.

The use of state power — including the power to intimidate, shame, disadvantage, confiscate, imprison, torture, and kill — to enforce religious dogma against Roman ‘pagan’ religionists, unorthodox Christians, and sometimes Jews, represented a great moral collapse for Christianity and a fruitless effort on the part of the state. It also set a terrible precedent for later violence in the name of Jesus Christ. A faith that began in tender adoration and imitation of the executed Jesus of Nazareth became the co-operating partner in state abuses against the tender faith of others, including variant versions of Christian faith. In its co-operation with state religious persecution, the Church left behind the Jesus of the New Testament and the moral vision that had for so long anchored its life.

3. Christians lost their social distance from Roman culture and conveniently became the majority, thus losing their distinctive identity.

Again using Rodney Stark’s rough estimates, when Constantine came to power roughly ten per cent of the population of the Empire was Christian; by 350 that number had soared to 56 per cent.⁴³ Most historians, even Christian ones, acknowledge that this massive growth rate cannot be attributed solely to the intrinsic appeal of the Christian message or even to natural growth. Robert Mullin sums up the issue concisely:

The support of the emperors assured that the church would grow...To be a Christian was no longer a detriment in the Empire, but rather an advantage. To profess Christianity opened doors to a career in the administration of the Empire, and such positions could be quite lucrative. Enterprising towns could win better charters by proclaiming that they had become Christian. To profess Christianity now became for some not simply a path for doing good, but for doing well. The inevitable result of this shift in fortune was that insincere conversions began to be reported.⁴⁴

Early Christian communities had constituted a tiny minority of the population, an often persecuted sect. The only incentive people had for joining these communities was that they believed their message and wanted to share in their way of life. With Constantine, Christianity became the privileged religion of the Empire; with Theodosius, Nicene Christianity became the official and only sanctioned religion of the Empire. The Empire half-converted to Christianity; but it also half-converted Christianity. Certain egregious practices, like gladiator games and infanticide, were abandoned along with the worship of the old gods; but the violence and injustices of any

⁴³ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, p.7.

⁴⁴ Mullin, *Short World History*, p.59.

empire remained constitutive of this one. This is easy to miss if one is focusing on doctrinal and institutional developments, in which Christianity as doctrine and Church was indeed triumphing over the Vestal Virgins and the old Roman gods. But if one attends to Christianity as adherence to the moral vision of Jesus, it is easy to see how much of this kind of religion was being lost in the accommodation to late Roman imperial politics and culture.

4. Christians forgot the bitter taste of their own persecution and accepted the persecution of others.

It is hard not to grieve very deeply the transition of Christianity from a persecuted to a persecuting religion in the period from Constantine to Theodosius. Christians who once had their sacred books confiscated and destroyed now participated in confiscating and destroying the sacred books of others, including fellow Christians. A group whose leaders had been arrested and killed now supported the arrests and eventually supported the killing of the leaders of other groups. Christians whose churches and properties had been invaded and confiscated and destroyed now supported the invasion and confiscation and destruction of the temples and churches of others. Christians who had borne the full brunt of Roman imperial power employed to suppress their conscientiously held beliefs now supported the employment of Roman imperial power to suppress the conscientiously held beliefs of others. Christians who had once been martyred for rejecting the identification of the imperial will with the will of God now blessed that identification when the imperial will was avowedly Christian.

The Church suffered a tragic loss of historical memory. All of that elaborate martyrology, all of that sanctification of the memory of the murdered believers, did not prevent the Church from supporting the persecution of others. The Church was not long content to enjoy its newfound 'peace' from imperial persecution before it acquiesced in violating the peace of others.

Conclusion: Advances and Regressions for the Sacredness of Life

Whether for reasons of conviction or convenience, Roman emperors, beginning with Constantine, made a decision to favour the Church with privileges and power. Certainly the bloodied and exhausted Church was going to rejoice at the dawning of a new era of peace and security and was very likely to attribute this newfound peace to God's providential care. But peace became privilege and eventually power and then persecution. Susan

Wise Bauer, a Christian historian, is a bit too gracious when she says that ‘Christians in turn, would have had to be more than human to resist what Constantine was offering: the imprint of imperial power.’⁴⁵ Looking back, one wonders if the Holy Spirit, who sustained the Church’s moral vision for three centuries, was whispering to church leaders at this pivotal moment that, while peace for the Church was a good gift, the ‘imprint of imperial power’ was an offer that must be refused.⁴⁶ By the end of the fourth century the bishop of Rome was able to drive the emperor of Rome to his knees. By the end of the fifth century, in the west there was no emperor of Rome, and western Catholicism had inherited his fragments. In the east, the marriage of throne and altar had settled in for a good long run. Christendom had been born.

Luke Timothy Johnson summarizes aptly the developments we have been reviewing:

Christians moved from a place of hiding to a posture of display, from a condition in which their property could be dispossessed to a condition in which property was bestowed on them, from a marginal to a central social status, from a status of mockery to one of privilege, from a situation in which the cross of Christ was the signal for danger to themselves to a situation in which the cross of Christ was emblazoned on the banners of imperial troops carried into battle. History has known few such profound reversals of fortune and it is not in the least surprising that the majority of Christians should gladly embrace their new status as the Empire’s favored religion.⁴⁷

During the fateful transition to Christendom, reverence for the sacred worth of every human life was extended in some important respects and receded in others. A world without authorized gladiator contests, crucifixion, and infanticide was a better world, in large part due to Christian influence translated into imperial law. But the Church now far too often blessed the mistreatment of those classified as heretics, schismatics, and enemies of the emperor and the Empire. Its marriage with state power compromised its original resistance to violence, which became not just permissible but, all too often, holy.

Christianity’s life-revering vision was badly damaged. I believe that the Church’s career since the transition to Christendom reveals the profound seriousness of the damage and the survival of that vision, embodied by many of the Church’s most admirable dissenters.

⁴⁵ Bauer, *History of the Medieval World*, p.11.

⁴⁶ That was what most of the monastics concluded in any case. González, *Story of Christianity*, ch.15.

⁴⁷ Johnson, *Among the Gentiles*, p.258.

Sacredness and Contemporary Applications

David P. Gushee

Introduction

There began to be a strong recovery of the language of life's sacredness, or at least its cognate, human dignity, after World War II. This historic legacy of biblical faith via Christian civilization, which had largely been secularized or rejected during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, resurfaced after the horrors of the 1930s and 1940s. Much of the ferment in the political, intellectual, and religious landscape after 1945 can be linked to one or another kind of struggle to re-sacralize human life. Humanity was regrouping, overcoming past blind spots, and trying to find a way forward after thirty especially horrific years of desecrations.

The disastrous legacy of two wars was met by determined efforts to create structures of politics and law, international peacemaking, and global morality that would prevent any recurrence of such global conflagrations. The emergence of a long, frightening Cold War and the proliferation of nuclear weapons made the avoidance of war increasingly seem to be a matter not only of human well-being but of human survival. Beginning with the formation of the United Nations and the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, domestic and international legal structures and moral norms were strengthened to limit tyrannical power, uphold the rule of law, protect human rights, prevent genocide and other war crimes, and hold wrongdoers accountable. A number of countries began to limit the power of their governments to kill their own people for political or other crimes.

Racist, colonialist, and imperialist subjugation of dominated peoples was morally delegitimized and politically resisted all around the world, from the anti-colonialist struggles of the Global South to the Civil Rights movement of the United States to the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. A global moment for women's rights entered a new stage in the 1960s and 1970s that improved women's lives in large parts of the world, while leaving much undone. An international movement on behalf of gay and lesbian rights was born, with effects still being felt. Efforts to tackle global poverty and human health intensified during this same period, accompanied by a growing intolerance of the largely preventable suffering of the world's poor majority. The 1960s also saw the birth of a global environmental movement with concerns ranging from ecosystem damage to species loss to animal rights to long-term human survival.

In the United States, after the 1960s, left/right polarization divided moral concern into a more progressive social justice agenda over against a more conservative ‘sacredness of life’ agenda. Conservatives, many of them Christian, mobilized against abortion after the polarizing national legalization of abortion in 1973. Meanwhile, other medical-technological developments began to raise new moral issues, such as physician-assisted suicide, contraception, reproductive technologies, and human embryo research. Such issues as peacemaking, death penalty abolition, and global poverty became viewed as ‘progressive’ or liberal concerns, separate from a conservative sacredness of life agenda. But these divisions were and are both artificial and tragic. If each and every human life is of sacred worth, unique and incalculably precious, *any* issue having to do with the survival, security, and flourishing of large numbers of human beings is a sacredness of life issue. It is also a social justice issue, if we understand social justice as a commitment to right relations between people, leading to actions that deliver people from oppression and restore them to right relations in community.

In the bulk of this lecture I will alphabetically take up a number of issues facing us today in which life’s protection and flourishing are at stake. I will choose some issues from the ‘social justice’ list and some from the ‘sacredness of life’ list and attempt to overcome the distinction. I hope that the significance of the basic conviction of life’s sacredness will be visible, even if that conviction cannot decisively settle the moral issues under consideration.

Consideration of Contemporary Issues

Abortion

Although the precise moral status of embryonic and fetal life is not clearly established in scripture,¹ the early Christian movement treated both abortion and infanticide as child-murder and, as such, utterly incompatible with Christian discipleship. But the Church also taught a sexual ethic that restricted sex to marriage, an ethic of hospitality for and solidarity with unwanted people, and an ethic of economic sharing.² Those who practise such an ethic today do not need abortion (as much, or as often), because they have sexual relations only in contexts in which children can be welcomed; or, if they do face crisis pregnancies, they can find Christian communities that can lovingly travel the journey through pregnancy with them; and they

¹ For discussion of this claim, see Glen H. Stassen and David P. Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2001), ch.10.

² See David P. Gushee, *The Sacredness of Human Life: Why an Ancient Biblical Idea is Key to the World’s Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), ch.4.

never have to abort due to lack of access to the economic resources necessary to sustain a pregnancy or to raise a child.

The ethos I am describing is a fair rendering, sadly, of only a minority of our churches. And it certainly does not describe modern western cultures, especially that of the United States. We often do not restrict sex to marriage, we do not stand in solidarity with unwanted people, and we do not participate in adequate economic sharing. And because it is women rather than men who get pregnant, legal access to abortion became a non-negotiable demand of the organized women's movement in the 1960s. For forty years abortion on demand has been our cultural practice, despite nods in the law toward a more restrictive stance.

My efforts on this issue have been based on the observation that our societies have become dependent on abortion to underwrite our libertine sexual practices and individualist-libertarian social and economic practices. While consistently defending the position that the sacredness of human life extends into the womb, and that our abortion laws do not adequately protect fetal life, I have focused on addressing the cultural sources of our dependence on abortion and on practical abortion reduction measures that can be pursued by individuals, churches, civil society, and policymakers. These include emphasizing sexual responsibility, including the responsibility to use contraception properly if one intends to have sex but not make a baby, strengthening the permanence of male-female relationships, and providing social supports for those facing crisis pregnancies. Rolling back abortion access under law is not enough. The goal here is less and less and finally no more killing of the unborn. The best means to get there is a practical question requiring careful and realistic analysis in each cultural context.

Creation Care

I have had the privilege of being a part of creation care (Christian environmentalist) efforts since 1990. Well before there was any discussion of climate change, the essentials of creation care were well-established: a combination of the retrieval and recasting of biblical theology and ethics related to caring for God's creation, and serious attention to contemporary environmental science.³ Together these teach both that this is God's sacred, resilient, and life-sustaining creation, and that God's creation is indeed vulnerable to the damaging human mistreatment that we mete out to it.

³ See the work of the Evangelical Environmental Network, including the 1993 statement on the care of creation, here: <http://creationcare.org/blank.php?id=39>, accessed March 20, 2013.

To get there, Christians have had to do some important theological and ethical work. We first had to retrieve a theology of creation and integrate it into our salvation-heavy, often other-worldly theology. Then we began to see that it is not just a theology of creation that we need, but a more cosmic theology of creation, fall, redemption, and eschatology. In other words, it is not just that God created the world and we need to care for it, but also that God's project on the planet has never been just about human beings but has always involved relating to and acting to redeem the entire cosmic order, all of it precious to God. This has integrated nicely into biblical work, for example, retrieving the ecologically rich shalom teachings of the Old Testament, as well as a broad kingdom ethic in the New Testament leading to an eschatology of renewal rather than destruction of creation.⁴

And Christians have had to begin to come to terms with contemporary science. If the global scientific community tells us that we are altering and/or damaging creation, whether in terms of species losses or fishery depletion or climate change, then we must take those claims seriously — never uncritically, as if science is infallible, but always seriously, as if science has a particular role to play in monitoring and theorizing the health of creation. My encounters with great scientists like E.O. Wilson⁵ and climatologists like Judy Curry⁶ — and being raised by a rigorous environmental scientist, my own father — have given me a deep and informed appreciation of the gifts and limits of the scientific method. Certainly evangelicals need to listen closely to the research of the scientific community and not stop up our ears on the basis of an outmoded theology of dominion or oddly ahistorical belief in the supposed imperviousness of creation to human maltreatment.⁷

Death Penalty

Retention of the death penalty in the United States places us at odds with our peers in the modern western world, and probably reflects both our relative innocence of massive unjust governmental killing and the continued influence of Old Testament death penalty law (unfiltered either by the Talmudic tradition or a Christ-centred kingdom ethic). It is certainly instructive to note that any map of US states retaining, and especially those broadly employing, the death penalty, tracks rather closely with high levels of religiosity, and especially southern religiosity.⁸

⁴ See, for example, N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (New York: HarperOne, 2008).

⁵ Every Christian really must read his *The Creation* (New York: Norton, 2007).

⁶ Her blog on climate change science is fair and authoritative: <http://judithcurry.com/>, accessed April 15, 2016.

⁷ A signal example of the theology I am rejecting is found in the work of Calvin Beisner.

⁸ The most authoritative source of updated information is found at: <http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/documents/FactSheet.pdf>, accessed April 15, 2016.

I have become convinced that a Christian sacredness-of-life ethic cannot ultimately abide the state practice of killing a small, select number of criminals, even murderers, from among the universe of murderers we unfortunately produce every year in the United States.⁹ My position is informed by the early church's revulsion against violence, including state violence; by the massive misuse of the state power to kill, especially in the twentieth century; by the manifest and obvious injustices in the US application of the death penalty, which remains essentially arbitrary, though tied to systemic racial and economic injustices; and by the near-total rejection of the death penalty in contemporary Catholic and ecumenical social ethics.

I do understand that a sacredness of life argument can be made in favour of the death penalty, and that this is precisely what appears to be happening in Genesis 9.6 and in Old Testament death penalty law.¹⁰ I also can see how practical solidarity with the oppressed leads one to sympathy not just with people on death row but also with cruelly murdered people and their bereaved families. And I know that Christian ethics, even an ethics of the inaugurated kingdom, must come to terms with the extent to which the world is not yet redeemed, and the extent to which evil must still be restrained by the hand of the state.

But a robust theology of sin extends to include the sins of the state in its bungling of, and misuse of, its ultimate power, the power to kill. This ultimately shapes my opposition to the use of that power when there is any available alternative, as there is in any well-functioning criminal justice system. I also believe that those who enter into concern about the anachronistic survival of the death penalty also need to engage other abuses in criminal justice, including the overuse of solitary confinement, the continued role of racism, the fearful powerlessness of those lacking adequate legal representation, and the way that those who have been imprisoned are so often disenfranchised for life, both in terms of civic rights and economic opportunity.¹¹

Economic Justice

Probably the central theme of both ecumenical and Catholic social teaching in the past century has been economic justice. The context has been the paradox of modern capitalism, which over its four-century run has proven to be both an engine of unimagined economic growth and prosperity

⁹ There were 16,259 homicides in the US in 2010. See <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/homicide.htm>, accessed March 20, 2013. Only 104 convicted murderers were sentenced to death. That is a rate of .63%.

¹⁰ We deal with this text and the biblical evidence generally in *Kingdom Ethics*, ch.9.

¹¹ See <http://www.justicefellowship.org/> for one version of justice reform efforts.

contributing to human flourishing (for its individual, corporate, and national winners) and a brutal, dehumanizing engine of economic injustice and poverty (for its individual, corporate, and national losers). Modern Christian social ethics was born in response to modern capitalism, especially in response to the manifest cruelties which inspired the Marxist critique that by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries threatened to delegitimize capitalism altogether.

Of course, we know what happened. The Russian and Chinese empires eventually chose Communism, which turned out to produce regimes of mass poverty, a wealthy governing class and unimaginable mass killing. The fascist regime in Germany rejected Communism and also produced unimaginable mass killing. Western Europe and the United States ultimately chose to retain some form of free-market capitalism embedded within liberal democratic political regimes that imposed regulatory schemes, progressive taxation, and a social safety net to care for those who could not, or could no longer, earn a living in a capitalist economy. This safety net should be seen as a direct expression of respect for the sacredness of human life.

There has essentially been a convergence of Catholic, ecumenical, and much evangelical social ethics in this arena around such principles as human sacred worth or dignity, solidarity, the common good, worries over consumerism and commodification, concern for capitalism's losers, global economic injustice, and so on. Almost everyone agrees that there is little alternative today to some form of capitalism, but also that a morally blind and rapacious capitalism that loses a vision for anything other than Profit ultimately devours itself.

The goal of full-employment economies offering everyone the opportunity to do dignified work at a living wage, reducing income inequality, feeding everyone and preventing easily preventable diseases, offering decent and affordable health care to all, regulating and taxing just enough but not too much, continues to elude most countries, including our own. But, outside of ideological libertarians and a few surviving Christian Marxists, contemporary Christian social teaching at least offers these shared goals, as well as significant programmes that ameliorate some of the worst effects of global capitalism.

Gay Rights

Traditionalist Christians have treated homosexuality as an issue in sexual ethics, and have almost unanimously ruled out the moral legitimacy of any same-sex acts and relationships. In western societies, however, 'the gay issue' is no longer viewed as an issue in sexual ethics. It has become a civil rights issue, an issue of social equality and the equal sacred worth of all

persons. Gays and lesbians have successfully made the transition from a hidden minority viewed as sexually deviant to a public minority viewed as victims of indignity and oppression.

Those opposed to such advances are increasingly seen as retrograde, and are sometimes compared to those who opposed civil rights for black Americans in the 1960s. It is not at all unthinkable that the tide will turn to such an extent that Christian institutions that continue to discriminate against gays will face social and legal delegitimation.¹² Meanwhile, as Gabe Lyons and David Kinnaman showed, Christian anti-gay rhetoric has increasingly cost us missionally and in the transmission of our faith to the next generation of our own children.¹³

Regardless of whether one is open to a reconsideration of Christian sexual ethics per se, many of the most important themes in Christian social ethics argue for Christians to welcome social gains for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people. Practical solidarity with the oppressed; radically inclusive kingdom community in Christ; the love of God for all; and a broad, holistic sacredness of life vision should all lean us toward solidarity with this particular small population of historically oppressed neighbours.

Guns

Bullets pierce the fragile human bodies that God so fearfully and wonderfully made, wounding and killing those who are sacred in God's sight at a rate of nearly one thousand per month each year in my bloodstained country.¹⁴ There are at least two kinds of gun incidents that afflict US society in a profound and disproportionate way as compared to other parts of the world. There are first the daily handgun killings that take one or two lives daily in cities. The victims of these killings are mainly poor, urban, racial and ethnic minority citizens whose neighbourhoods are deeply blighted by drugs, gangs, unemployment, and violence. And then there are the mass shootings which have become so terribly ubiquitous, usually involving an alienated young white man with an assault weapon killing large numbers of innocent people in some supposedly safe public place like a school, mall, or movie theatre. And this is not to mention the daily suicides and domestic violence incidents and accidents that take so many lives.¹⁵

¹² For *Bob Jones case* (1983), see http://www.oyez.org/cases/1980-1989/1982/1982_81_3, accessed March 20, 2013.

¹³ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Unchristian* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007).

¹⁴ For documentation of this and other terrifying statistics, see <http://smartgunlaws.org/gun-deaths-and-injuries-statistics/>, accessed March 20, 2013.

¹⁵ One authoritative organization is the Coalition to Prevent Gun Violence. See <http://www.csgv.org/>, accessed April 15, 2016.

The only possible legitimate use of violent force is defensive. The Bible certainly offers grounds for suggesting that the responsibility for such legitimate defensive force belongs to the state rather than individuals (cf. Romans 13.1-7). But many Americans have made a fetish out of an interpretation of the Second Amendment to our Constitution, which was really about establishing armed militias and instead has become viewed as a near-absolute right of private citizens to buy and own guns. Most people in the 34 per cent of US households that possess firearms intend them for defensive and recreational purposes.¹⁶ But so often these purposes are shattered: when a depressed person kills herself; when an angry person kills his perhaps estranged lover; when a homicidal-suicidal young man decides to make some sick kind of social statement at a school or church.

We are afflicted by a gun culture, perhaps traceable to our Revolutionary War roots and our Wild West heritage. We love our guns and we associate them with self-defence, justice and virility. The more we kill each other with guns, the more guns we buy to secure ourselves,¹⁷ and thus the more guns we make available for further suicides, murders, accidents, and rages.

Christians surely can do better than this. Surely the sacredness of life, basic social justice, and the demands of peace lead us away from rather than toward an adoration of guns or trust in guns for our security. Surely we can stand in solidarity with the thousands of victims of gun violence and against the gun makers and their lobbyists. There is a deep cultural sickness here which we must address as Christians. Surely Christians should stand in support both of cultural change and of common-sense gun control measures such as stricter background checks examining both criminal and mental health records, mandating smaller gun magazines, and limiting military-style weapons in private hands.

Human Rights

After World War II, human rights became the primary public language in which to discuss all significant ethical issues and, indeed, in which to contest most major domestic and international policy issues. This reflected an almost desperate quest to lay some kind of foundation upon which a new world order could be built out of the rubble of two world wars — from Verdun to Rotterdam to Babi Yar to Auschwitz to Hiroshima.

¹⁶ See <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/10/us/rate-of-gun-ownership-is-down-survey-shows.html?page=wanted=all&r=0>, accessed March 20, 2013.

¹⁷ The more gun killings in America, the more we buy guns. See <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/01/29/us-usa-guns-fbi-checks-idUSBRE90S01J20130129>, accessed March 20, 2013.

By now, an entire apparatus of human rights declarations, conventions, and treaties has been elaborated. For the first time in human history, individual human rights are now guaranteed by international law; presidents and kings can be indicted by international criminal tribunals for their offences against individuals.¹⁸ The international community now is charged with a 'responsibility to protect' endangered minorities and other groups in any country in the world. These have been extraordinary developments, worthy of celebration despite the tragic and damnable failures of enforcement (as in the Rwandan Genocide) that in some cases have evoked the strengthening of these norms.

There are a number of Christian theologians and ethicists who worry that rights-talk is selfish talk, always about *me* claiming *my* rights. This concern is also sometimes articulated alongside a suspicion that all of this rights-talk invites a cultural ethos encouraging the endless elaboration of increasingly dubious rights-claims. Wants become rights, freedom becomes licence. This is the fear. Is there a way beyond this impasse? The biblical command to love one's neighbour, to treat her as the 'sacred animal' (Lactantius) that she is, creates binding duties for the Christian. Our neighbours are needy creatures who are vulnerable to harm and even desecration from every side. They have bodies that are exquisitely responsive to pain (this can be exploited to terrorize or torture them); they have relationships which matter deeply to them (this also can be exploited to terrorize or torture them); they need food and shelter (this can be denied them long enough to immiserate or kill them). The obligation to love our neighbours in a manner commensurate with their sacred worth and responsive to their vulnerability and neediness creates a Christian duty to intervene on their behalf when their worth is being violated, their core needs are going unmet, or their vulnerability is being exploited.

Contemporary human rights language is a way to systematize and in some cases legalize claims of persons in community upon others, claims corresponding with core human needs and vulnerabilities, and ultimately rooted in divinely conferred sacred worth. So *others* have rights, which we must act to protect, and *we* have rights, which they must act to protect, because all of us are humans who stand before God the Creator of all humanity. Rights-talk is a way of making concrete the obligations of neighbour-love when the neighbour has been declared to be sacred in God's sight.

Certainly human rights are a far less coherent notion apart from a biblical theological foundation, but in pluralistic discourse we all do the best

¹⁸ A very helpful, non-specialist source on these issues is Thomas Buergenthal, et al. *International Human Rights in a Nutshell*, 4th ed. (West Publishers, 2009).

we can, and in the Christian community we are entirely free to re-anchor human rights language in the best resources of our own theological tradition. Once we have dispensed with our theological reservations about the language and implications of rights claims, Christians ought to be some of the world's most vigorous champions for the legitimate human rights of our neighbours near and far. Such advocacy and service is an apt expression of our sacredness-of-life ethic, a point of fellow-service with people of other faiths and no faith, and a redemptive form of Christian witness in a world fully aware of historic Christian failures and fully weary of meaningless Christian rhetoric.

Immigration

Approximately 11 million human beings, primarily but not exclusively from Latin America, live illegally in the shadows of American society because they came without documents or stayed beyond the time permitted, or perhaps were brought here as children by their parents. Many serve in the underground economy, doing jobs that Americans do not want to do. They have no legal rights and live in fear of arrest and deportations that shatter their families. Most came here because they simply wanted a better life. Similar problems exist in Europe, of course, and in many other parts of the world.

For at least a decade US policymakers have been attempting to solve the illegal immigration problem, with solutions ranging from a proposed mass deportation to various legalization plans. A comprehensive plan involves a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants, together with efforts to block further illegal immigration and assimilate undocumented immigrants into US economic and political life. A broad coalition of religious, civic, human rights, business, and law enforcement officials support such a plan.

This is an issue where Christian insights genuinely make a difference. This world's classification of nation states and their borders is not ultimate. Earthly citizenship matters greatly to nation states but really very little in the context of the reign of God and the sacredness of each life. Christians are called to stand with the oppressed, with those in the shadows, with those hungry, afraid, and powerless. Each and every human life is sacred, and so we are not easily persuaded by language crudely differentiating 'illegals' from the rest of us good, regular citizen types. Christians can play a decisive role on immigration and refugee issues in the United States and all over the world.

Nuclear Weapons

Any use of nuclear weapons, especially in an international nuclear war, threatens the sacredness of life more than any other single threat the world faces. Yet efforts to get the world community to nuclear abolition continue to falter. As long as possessing nuclear weapons is seen as the best way to secure one's regime or nation from destruction, leaders and nations will seek them. If any nation feels insecure, all will in fact be insecure. So we need to find ways to meet the legitimate security needs of every nation for the sake of all nations. Relationships between nations can easily default to a Hobbesian state of nature, unless a fabric of international covenants and treaties observed by all nations weaves the peoples together under the rule of law. We need to find ways to strengthen that fabric.

Weapons of this level of destructiveness have to be quarantined from other kinds of weapons so that their use is delegitimized. So we need to find ways to continue to quarantine nuclear weapons from other types of weapons, and delegitimize any possible use of these weapons.

It is not just weapons themselves that matter but also the quality of the relationships between the nations that develop and deploy them. So we need to find ways to reduce fear, generate trust, and build friendships between nations. Some of our best and brightest young people need to enter the diplomatic corps, and the skills of the world's diplomats need strengthening. The human heart, even the collective human heart as found in nations, dilates between fear and hope. So we need to find ways to reduce fear and build hope, such as employing unilateral confidence building measures as independent peacemaking initiatives. We need to create constant and open channels of communication between nations, even those that view each other as enemies, rather than ever shutting down communication. Too much is at stake to stop talking with other nations. Fear and anger tend to produce a hostile rhetoric of blame that produces more fear and anger in a vicious cycle. So we need to train ourselves and require of political leaders a posture of rhetorical restraint, articulated respect for other peoples and nations, and a willingness to confess wrongs that have damaged relations in the past.

The Damocles Sword of nuclear annihilation has hung over our heads since 1945. By God's grace working through responsible human action and restraint, that sword has not fallen. It is one of the twenty-first century's greatest moral challenges to remove that sword from over all of us at last. Thousands of nuclear weapons were left on the international table when the Cold War ended, as if somehow they would dismantle themselves when everyone's attention turned to other issues. They did not dismantle themselves. We human beings must do that. We created them; we must uncreate them.

The most heavily armed nation in the world, the United States, must take the lead. We must continue to reduce our nuclear weapons toward zero, preferably by stages under the provisions of multilateral treaties, as we work against nuclear proliferation and nuclear terrorism. The goal is clear; what is lacking is the will. The leading religious community in the United States, Christians, must help build the moral consensus required to move toward this goal. To do so, America's Christians must learn to see nuclear weapons as a leading sacredness-of-life issue, and respond accordingly. We must be the first community in our nation to declare our readiness to live entirely without nuclear weapons.

Torture

The facts remain clear: The United States was attacked by non-state terrorists who targeted civilians. These terrorists did real and terrible damage, of course, most horribly in the 9/11 attacks. Policymakers were rightly aware of their responsibility for preventing and deterring future attacks. In wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and in global anti-terror operations, the US Government detained tens of thousands of suspected terrorists. In contravention of US law, international law, and our treaty obligations, we abused many of these suspected terrorists and crossed the line to torture in a number of cases. This happened sometimes when soldiers and intelligence officers went beyond policy, but also when they attempted to follow policy as revised from the White House. The bulk of the abuses occurred at the hands of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and its contractors, but responsibility for the revised policies goes to the top of the US government. A primary way in which abuses and torture were justified was by a strategy of euphemism, in which a combination of abusive and torturous techniques was authorized under the term 'enhanced interrogation'. These assaults on prisoners violated the sacredness of human life.

Most Christians accept the defensive role of government as authorized in a text like Romans 13. But too many Christians uncritically believed government and popular arguments that the demands of national defence in this 'new kind of war'¹⁹ justified extreme and abusive measures that most international and many fair-minded domestic observers would classify as torture. Evangelicals polled as more open to the legitimation of torture than people of other faiths or no faith.²⁰ I consider this the most distressing polling result that I have ever seen in my thirty-four years as a Christian, and the

¹⁹A commonly used phrase to describe the post-9/11 situation, as in this speech by then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld: <http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=440>, accessed March 20, 2013.

²⁰ See <http://www.pewforum.org/Politics-and-Elections/The-Religious-Dimensions-of-the-Torture-Debate.aspx>, accessed March 20, 2013.

most compelling reason I have ever encountered to renounce my connection to the American evangelical community. I continue to urge us to resist in the strongest possible manner any resort to torture or any moral legitimization of torture from anyone, even if they call it ‘enhanced interrogation’. This debate continues in US public life, though more quietly at this moment. Surely it should have been conclusively decided long ago.

War-making

We are coming near the end of fourteen years of war in Afghanistan. The mess in Iraq, Syria, and surrounding nations continues. The public debate about US war-making is shifting away from ground invasions to the propriety of technologically advanced drone warfare. Defence spending cuts may constrain the freedom of US policymakers to pursue aggressive military engagement around the world, as they have for other nations. Still, the US has 1.4 million troops in over 150 nations,²¹ we patrol the seas, and we have a \$700 billion plus military budget, as large as the next fourteen nations combined.²² It can hardly be said that, as of now, the US has rolled back its massive military presence terribly far.

In retrospect, the twentieth century created the conditions for the United States to become an expansive military power and to create a bloated national security apparatus. We entered World War I very late, and contributed to Allied victory with relatively minimal losses. We entered World War II late, and contributed again to Allied victory, with much larger losses. We entered immediately into a global ideological-geopolitical battle with the Soviet Union, in which proxy wars and covert operations played a very large part. We built the Pentagon and the CIA, the National Security Agency and undoubtedly a dozen clandestine services whose names we do not yet know. The power to wage war was increasingly centred in the executive branch, the Constitution notwithstanding. A volunteer (i.e., paid) military after Vietnam localized the human costs of war to a tiny sliver of our population, now significantly traumatized after the wars of this past decade. The near-seamless transition from a War on Communism to a War on Islamist Terror reinforced in us the habit of permanent war, open or clandestine. Our vast size and economic prosperity enabled us to afford a global military presence and massive national security bureaucracy with little difficulty. And we were convinced that all our operations were good and just.

Christians have the theological and ethical resources to question all of this, but most Christians were generally rather uncritical, the left excluded.

²¹ See <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/us-troops-around-world>, accessed March 20, 2013.

²² See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_military_expenditure, accessed March 20, 2013.

If our leaders told us it was time to fight, we fought. We provided and still provide a disproportionate number of US foot soldiers and chaplains.²³ With notable exceptions, we did not strongly protest the nuclear arms race, with its threat of mass global death. The Christian Right identified the US cause with God's cause and saw no problem with supporting constant US military engagements. Perhaps we lacked the critical distance to see the US the way others did; international Christians provided dissonant observations, but we were not always receptive.

The challenge today is for Christians in America to lead the way in helping wean our nation off of its global pride and hegemony; in gradually unravelling the national security bureaucracy and shrinking the size of the military; in restoring greater democratic accountability to national decision making about war, including questioning the use of drones; and in de-normalizing the permanent war footing that has come to characterize our way of life and so often leads to desecrations of human life.

Women's Rights

While Christians were (are) fighting over whether women could be pastors, we were mainly missing global women's sacredness of life concerns such as honour killings, bride burnings, sex-selective abortions, neglect and infanticide of female babies and children, lack of access to basic health care for women, easily preventable maternal mortality, gender-based violence against women, and lack of women's control over decisions such as whether and with whom to have sex, to marry, and to have children.

The recent Christian discovery of sex trafficking ought to lead us into an engagement with the wider range of human rights violations against women and the very many ways in which women continue to be treated as less than fully human in many places in the world.²⁴ This in turn should lead to a reconsideration of what still remains an anti-feminist bent among many Christians, and a turn toward appreciation for those who have flown the flag of a genuinely Christian feminism over the past three decades.²⁵ When we learn about women who are routinely raped during war, or married against their will, or sold into sex slavery, or are unable to get their AIDS-infected husband to wear a condom during sex, or are denied access to an education or the ability to own property, or cannot get decent medical care while delivering babies, perhaps we will be motivated to reconsider the gains that

²³ See <http://www.instituteforscienceandhumanvalues.net/articles/religious%20discrimination%20military.htm>, accessed March 20, 2013.

²⁴ One indispensable source is Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, *Half the Sky* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009).

²⁵ Congratulations to Christians for Biblical Equality for their leadership: see <http://www.cbeinternational.org/>, accessed March 20, 2013.

the feminist movement won for women in the western world — our mothers, sisters, wives, and daughters.

Conclusion

The normative payoff of a sacredness of life ethic is more obvious with regard to some issues than to others. Any practice that risks or takes human life on a mass scale or unnecessarily, that treats some human beings as worthless or worth less than others, or that intentionally attacks the human body or human spirit, pretty clearly violates a sacredness of life ethic. Such an ethic proves its value more clearly with regard to what it prohibits or bans than what it encourages or requires. This is true in many other areas of ethics as well: negative moral prohibitions, like ‘thou shalt not kill’ are easier to understand, obey, and adjudicate than positive moral injunctions like ‘love your neighbour as yourself’.

I have learned that in the European setting, ‘human dignity’ has become an increasingly important feature of both national and European Union law and culture. In some of its uses, invocations of human dignity track so closely with what I am calling a ‘sacredness of life’ ethic that it is easy to see them as essentially synonymous. Indeed, in my *Sacredness of Human Life* book I claimed that modern human dignity language is essentially a secularization of sacredness of life language, mainly via a stripping of theological foundations. But it is now apparent to me that for some, at least, understandings of human dignity have become so closely identified with autonomy that the concept offers little normative claim other than a demand not to violate individual choices insofar as those choices are not harmful to others. The issue is most sharply posed in areas of bioethics, such as, for example, assisted suicide, in which human dignity is claimed as foundational for a supposed right to assisted suicide – resisted by many Christians, including myself, on sacredness of life grounds.

One way to say it is that Christians have believed that there is a God-given moral order to the world, which includes a sacred value for each and every life and a moral obligation before God to honour that value. Thus no act that violates the sacred worth of a human life could be an expression of human dignity. But if human dignity is equated with autonomy and a self-defined understanding of what dignity means to and for me, then dignity has no such transcendent reference point. It means what it means to me. I fear that the deep secularization of our northern hemisphere countries will likely mean the triumph of this desiccated understanding of human dignity. Perhaps this will make for a good place to begin our conversation. I am grateful for your attention to these three long lectures!

Reconciling Conflicting Convictions on the Sovereignty of God and the Freedom of Human Beings: Three Centuries (16th-18th) of Baptist Universalism

Johannes Aakjær Steenbuch

A central discussion in Protestant orthodoxy has been that between those who affirmed the sovereignty and the predestining election of God on the one hand, and those who affirmed the general scope of the atonement and the freedom of human beings to reject grace on the other. While both assumed an eschatology where only some human beings would finally be saved, a third position was held by theologians who simultaneously affirmed the sovereignty of God and the generality of his love and the atoning sacrifice of Christ. Some of these were Anabaptists or Baptists, who argued that the conflicting opinions in Protestant orthodoxy about the sovereignty of God and the freedom of the human will could be reconciled by applying some sort of biblical universalism.

Key Words

Sovereignty, Predestination, Anabaptist, Baptist, Universalism

Introduction

Should we emphasize the sovereignty of God at the cost of having to narrow the scope of his love and mercy and the freedom of human beings? Or should we instead emphasize the universal scope of God's love as well as the freedom of human beings to resist grace at the cost of God's sovereignty? Questions such as these seem to have been at the core of many theological controversies in the slipstream of the Reformation. The broad variety of answers makes the period of Protestant Orthodoxy somewhat confusing: Lutheran Orthodoxy seems to have had more in common with Erasmus, and later the Arminians, than with Luther, who in turn seems to have been more Calvinist than Calvin himself. The High and Hyper-Calvinists of the eighteenth century were neither Lutheran nor Calvinists in the sense of Calvin, while the Anabaptists and Baptists did not seem to embrace an idea of universal salvation as was claimed in the Augsburg Confession. Or did they? Well, some did, and some even saw the doctrine of universal salvation as a way of reconciling the conflicting beliefs about God's omnipotence and sovereignty on the one hand and the freedom of the human will to resist the general grace of God on the other. This will be the topic of the following

discussion.

My first example is Hans Denck (1500-1527), a contemporary of Erasmus of Rotterdam and Martin Luther, whose opposing views on the freedom of the human will Denck sought to reconcile by applying a concept of ‘yieldedness’ or *Gelassenheit*. My second example is Georg Klein-Nikolai (1671-1723), author of *The Everlasting Gospel*, a work from around 1700 in which a form of restorationism is proposed as a way to reconcile Lutheran Orthodoxy with Reformed theology. My third and final example is the theology of Elhanan Winchester (1751-1797), who believed that a kind of biblical universalism, much like that of *The Everlasting Gospel*, could reconcile Calvinism and Arminianism, especially as conceived by the Particular Baptists and the General Baptists respectively.

As already suggested above, the background of this whole discussion is the problem of how theology should handle the sovereignty and omnipotence of God on the one hand and the responsibility and freedom of human beings to choose between belief and unbelief on the other. This issue was at the core of one of the most important discussions of the Reformation, namely that between Erasmus of Rotterdam and Martin Luther. In 1524 Erasmus released his book *On Free Will (De libero arbitrio diatribe sive collatio)* in which he argued that human beings possess some degree of freedom in their relationship to God and that the traditional Augustinian doctrine of predestination was not biblical. Luther, against Erasmus, famously held the view that the human will is not free in relation to God. As he put it, the human will is in bondage – either to God or to the Devil. Thus it depends on the predestining decision of God alone whether a person will have saving faith in the Gospel or not. According to his revealed will it is true that God wants all people to be saved (I Timothy 2.4), says Luther, but there is also a hidden will of God outside revelation that will not give all persons the capability of accepting faith.¹ In other words, Erasmus defended the general scope of God’s love as well as the freedom of human beings to reject grace in spite of this love, while Luther held that God sovereignly and unconditionally decides whom to love and whom to hate – and who will as a result of this love have saving faith and who will not.

Yielding to God

With Erasmus, many Anabaptists — such as Balthasar Hubmaier — held some notion of the freedom of the human will and the belief that human beings should actively choose to believe in or follow Christ.² But this was just one

¹ e.g., Martin Luther, *De Servo Arbitrio* (1525), WA 18,685.

² Kirk R. MacGregor, ‘Hubmaier’s Concord of Predestination with Free Will’, in *Direction: A Mennonite Brethren Forum* 35:2 (2006), pp.279-99; Morwenna Ludlow, ‘Why Was Hans Denck Thought To Be a

of many doctrines which separated the Lutherans from the Anabaptists. Besides the obvious disagreement on baptism, another important disagreement seems to lie behind the condemnations against the Anabaptists in the seventeenth article of the Augsburg Confession. This article condemns the Anabaptists for their alleged belief that there will be an end to the punishments of condemned men and devils. The condemnations of the seventeenth article of the Augsburg Confession does not at face value reflect the conflicting opinions on the freedom of the human will. But even so, for those Anabaptists who were subject to the condemnations, there might have been an implicit connection between some sort of soteriological universalism and an alternative view on the freedom of the human will.

This was at least the case for the South German Anabaptist leader Hans Denck. Hans Denck was born in 1500, studied in Ingolstadt and became acquainted with the Anabaptists at the time of the Reformation.³ Hans Denck not only sought a middle way between Erasmus and Luther on the issue of the freedom of the will, but also argued that damnation is only a temporary step on the way to salvation. Damnation and salvation are not irreconcilable opposites but parts of a greater whole. An important source of inspiration for Hans Denck seems to have been the anonymous work *Deutsche Theologie*, probably from the fourteenth century.⁴ In this work, which was also positively received by the young Martin Luther, a kind of spiritualism in the vein of German medieval mysticism is developed. An important element in the *Deutsche Theologie* is what has been called *resignatio ad infernum*. This theme is worked out as the human self is said to be incapable of doing any good in and of itself. In order to be saved, the human self must be broken down in a spiritual hell where it is deprived of all hope, and as a result is made to turn to God. This framework was taken over by Hans Denck.

As was also common in the tradition of mysticism, Denck showed a high appreciation of paradoxes. According to Denck, theological schisms and sects arise when people take out passages from Scripture and ignore the fact that there are always passages which seem to contradict each other. But truth can only be found, says Denck, by reconciling seemingly contradictory statements.⁵ Prophets can seem to disagree, but if they lead to God they all lead to truth.⁶ This approach to theological disagreements was also expressed in Denck's positive approach to Jews and Judaism. Werner Packull has for

Universalist?', in *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* Issue 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp.257-274.

³ See Clarence Bauman, *The Spiritual Legacy of Hans Denck* (Leiden: Brill, 1991).

⁴ *Eyn Deutsch Theologia*, etc. (Wittenberg 1518); Bernard McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism* (New York: The Crossroad Pub. Co., 2005), p.393.

⁵ Hans Denck, *Schriften. T. 1-3, Quellen und Forschungen zur Reformationsgeschichte* / Bd. 24.6. (ed. Walter Fellman) (Gütersloh, 1956); Denck II.68.14; Denck II.58.18-21.

⁶ Denck II.65.33.

this reason called Hans Denck ‘the ecumenical anabaptist’.⁷ Denck's desire to reconcile oppositions can be seen clearly in his approach to the discussion on the freedom of the will. At face value there seem to be two possible options, namely that human beings are either free or unfree in their relation to God.⁸ Both claims, says Denck, are in themselves true. But, when made by sinful human beings, both claims are at the same time untrue, as they speak about human nature from human nature itself. It makes no difference whether we call the human will free or in bondage. The truth about human freedom should be found in neither of these two claims, but in a third point. This third point is the breaking down of the human will, free or not, in ‘yieldedness’ or *Gelassenheit*. In his short treatise *Divine Order*, Denck describes how this works:

God desires everyone to be saved, 1 Timotheous 2. 4, 2 Peter 3, but knows full well that many condemn themselves, Romans 9. If then his will were to force anyone through a mere order, he could say the word this instant and it would happen, Matthew 8, Luke 7. But this would diminish his righteousness.⁹

So far, this sounds much like the usual arguments for the freedom of the human will to choose between belief and unbelief. But Denck goes on to argue that, as soon as the godless person rejects God, he ‘has come to the place for which he was predestined, which is hell’. But, says Denck:

He does not necessarily want to nor need he remain there, of course, Psalm 77; for even hell is open to the Lord and damnation has no cover, Job 26. [Hell] is not mightier than his strong arm except in the highest righteousness which we call his wrath, when he inflicts upon us the pains of hell, Psalm 18, and makes us aware of our misery that we might call on him in our despair for him to help us, Hosea 9.¹⁰

The point is that God inflicts on us the pains of hell in order to make us aware of our misery, so that we may eventually call upon God and be saved, Denck argues. Denck bases his position on passages in scripture such as Romans 11.32 where Paul states that ‘God hath shut up all unto disobedience, that he might have mercy upon all’ (ASV). God, in other words, humbles in order to save. But whereas this for Paul seems to have worked historically in the relationship between Israel and the Gentiles, for Denck it was more an inner, spiritual experience. Human beings need to go through an existential experience of being lost and damned in order to come to faith and thus salvation. Human beings are not saved *from* hell, but *through* hell.

In a similar way Denck in his confession states that the office of Christ is twofold (rather than threefold as, for example, in Eusebius and Calvin) as

⁷ Werner O. Packull, *Mysticism and the Early South German-Austrian Anabaptist Movement 1525-1531* (Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1977).

⁸ Denck II.107.24-25.

⁹ Denck II.90.23-26.

¹⁰ Denck II.92.10-17.

Christ through Law and Gospel destroys the unbeliever and brings life to the believer. But, says Denck, ‘all believers were once unbelievers. Consequently, in becoming believers, they thus first had to die in order that they might thereafter no longer live for themselves, as unbelievers do, but for God through Christ [...]’. David verifies this, Denck notes, as he says that ‘The Lord leads down into hell and up again’ (1 Samuel 2.6-8).

While many scholars have held Denck to be a universalist, others have argued that he was probably not, since he did hold to a belief in some degree of human freedom to reject grace.¹¹ I will not go further into this discussion here, except to mention that it is far from obvious that Denck believed that anyone would in fact keep on rejecting God forever. At any rate, the position of Hans Denck should not be considered a humanism of the Erasmian sort, where human beings are not so depraved by nature that they are incapable of choosing their own destiny.¹² By nature human beings are only free to do evil. But neither is Denck’s position that of Luther. Human beings are not forced into accepting grace, but as God works on the human will it will eventually break down and yield before God.

Hans Denck’s position could be characterized as a kind of critical spiritualism.¹³ Human beings cannot be said to be good by nature, as they are incapable of doing anything but evil by themselves, says Denck.¹⁴ In order to do good, human beings must be led to faith by the spiritual crisis inflicted on the self by the judgment of God which breaks down the human self. This is why faith is not a matter of exercising the human will, free or not, but of not exercising the human will in *Gelassenheit*. In faith human beings become nothing to themselves and thus something to God.¹⁵ Human beings are not in this way predestined to belief or unbelief in the strict deterministic sense, but are made to yield by God’s active work in the spirit.

The Everlasting Gospel

While Luther’s view was taken over by Calvin and formulated in terms of a double predestination, a moderate version closer to Erasmus’ view was formulated by Melanchthon as the claim that human beings, while not capable of choosing faith in God, are capable of resisting grace. This view became common in subsequent Lutheran Orthodoxy as we know it from the

¹¹ Ludlow, 2004, pp.257-274.

¹² In this I tend to disagree with, e.g., Rufus Jones, Werner Packull and others. See Rufus M. Jones, *Spiritual Reformers in the 16th and 17th Centuries* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1914); Packull 1977, p.58.

¹³ See Johannes Aakjær Steenbuch, ‘Kærlighedens dialektiker: Karakteristik af Hans Dencks kritiske spiritualisme’, in *Dansk Teologisk Tidsskrift* 77/3 (Copenhagen: Anis, 2014).

¹⁴ Denck II.54.1-10.

¹⁵ Denck II.33.15-24. Baptism, by the way, should follow this inner experience as an outward sign of an already present inner reality, says Denck.

Formula of Concord in which it is repeatedly stated that human beings are capable of resisting the Holy Spirit.¹⁶ Thus in the seventeenth century the positions held by Luther and Erasmus were now more or less represented by Calvinism and Lutheran Orthodoxy respectively. While the Reformed (Calvinist) side on the one hand accentuated double predestination and the belief that God sovereignly saves the elect, Lutheran Orthodoxy on the other hand emphasized the generality of the atonement and the ability of human beings to resist grace.

A theological strategy somewhat similar to that of Denck can be found in Georg Klein-Nikolai's pseudonymous work *Das von Jesu Christo dem Richter der Lebendigen und der Todten, aller Creatur zu predigen befohlene ewige Evangelium, von der durch Ihn erfundenen ewigen Erlösung, wodurch alles dem Richter der Lebendigen und der Todten, aller Creatur zu predigen befohlene ewige Evangelium, von der durch Ihn erfundenen ewigen Erlösung, wodurch alles* published in the name of Paul Siegvölck. Georg Klein-Nikolai was an associate of the radical pietist Johann Wilhelm Petersen and his theology seems to have drawn on that of Petersen, who was in turn influenced by Jane Leade and the Philadelphians. Another source of influence may have been the Schwarzenau Brethren, a radical pietistic group of German Baptists also known as the *Neue Täufer* or the *Tunkers*.¹⁷ Alexander Mack, the founder of the Schwarzenau Brethren, expressed a belief that after the collapse of several eternities or *aeons* there would be a final and universal restoration of all things, in which the godless through Christ would finally be saved from their torments in hell.¹⁸ It is not, however, necessary to talk or speculate much about it, says Mack. It is much better to practise truth here and now than deliberate about how to escape the torments of hell at a later point. Even though the doctrine of the universal restoration of all things is true, 'it should not be preached as a gospel to the godless'.

The doctrines of radical pietist universalists such as Mack and Petersen seem to have been derived partly from Jacob Boehme and perhaps Origen. The theology of *The Everlasting Gospel* was similarly Origenistic in its understanding of the history of salvation as progressing through ages or *aeons*, culminating in a final *telos*, the restitution of all things or *apokatastasis panton* through Christ. But, while Origen eagerly emphasized human freedom, *The Everlasting Gospel* is more reserved. It does seem, however, that the author of *The Everlasting Gospel* allows some degree of free choice of human beings between belief and unbelief. Those who choose not to believe will be subject to harsh punishments in this and the coming

¹⁶ e.g. *Formula of Concord*, XI. 39; 41; 73; 78.

¹⁷ It is not clear how closely associated Klein-Nikolai was with the Schwarzenau Brethren, or whether he was one of them, but his theology seems to express some basic ideas of theirs.

¹⁸ Alexander Mack, *Rights and Ordinances*; trans. H. R. Holsinger, *History of the Tunkers and the Brethren Church* (Oakland, Cal.: Pacific Press Publishing Co., 1901), pp.113-5.

world. But this is not an eschatological freedom in the sense that human beings at particular points of time can ultimately choose their final destination. God has designed punishments in order to correct the sinner, so that the sinner will eventually be led into salvation – again, in this world or the world to come. Klein-Nikolai writes:

The Holy Scripture declares that wicked men both can and do oppose and resist God; As also that no creature can resist the will of God. Though here seems an apparent contradiction, yet both these positions may well consist together;¹⁹

The creatures may resist the will of God, says Klein-Nikolai. This does not mean, however, that there is an ability and power in them, whereby they might repel and conquer the power and might of God that works in and upon them, in such a way that God could never get his will with the rebellious creatures.

The belief that creatures are in all eternity capable of resisting God makes creatures stronger than God and thus opens the way to all kinds of ‘iniquity and atheistic mockery’, says Klein-Nikolai.²⁰ It is only with God’s permission that the creature is allowed to resist God. The purpose is, says Klein-Nikolai, that ‘the creatures, who will not voluntarily choose the salvation and well-being offered to them, may taste of the bitter fruits of their disobedience’. As a result, the rebellious creatures will be finally conquered and thus ‘give themselves up to their Creator’, who is ‘able to subdue all’.²¹ The point is again, as with Hans Denck, that even if human beings have some degree of freedom, this freedom is essentially relative and subordinated to God’s sovereignty. Human beings do not have the ultimate freedom to choose their own destiny. God’s purposes cannot be thwarted. But, in distinction from the more Augustinian view of the human will as conceived by High Calvinism, God does not work directly upon the will or mind of human beings but only indirectly. By inflicting suffering on the human person God directs the will of that person into eventually accepting his free grace. As with Denck, it is central for Klein-Nikolai that it is simultaneously true that human beings are capable of resisting God on the one hand and that no creature can resist the will of God on the other. But truths must be reconciled in God’s plan of salvation. And, moreover, Klein-Nikolai likewise saw the doctrine of universal salvation as having a reconciliatory potential between conflicting opinions on the freedom of the human will. As he says:

This holy doctrine likewise shows the right foundation of divine election and eternal reprobation, and demonstrates both to Lutherans and Calvinists as well wherein each party is right, as what they want of the understanding of this

¹⁹ Georg Klein-Nikolai, *The Everlasting Gospel* (Copenhagen: Apophasis, 2015 (1700)), p.18.

²⁰ Klein-Nikolai, p.19.

²¹ Klein-Nikolai, pp.16-17.

important point.²²

Lutheran Orthodoxy is correct in claiming that God wills the salvation of all human beings and that he saves all who in this life come to faith in Christ. Likewise, the Calvinists are right in teaching that all whom God wills to be saved shall actually be saved: ‘Those whom God will have to be saved, will actually be saved. Now God plainly declares in his word, that he will have all men to be saved; therefore all men will be really saved at last.’²³ Klein-Nikolai adds that the doctrine of universal restoration is also capable of deciding the dispute with the Roman Catholics about purgatory.²⁴

The Everlasting Gospel was made available for the American audience by the German Baptists (Schwarzenau Brethren) of Germantown in Pennsylvania, as it was translated and published in English in 1753. It was this book which would become a main source of inspiration for Elhanan Winchester, who will be discussed in the following section.

The Outcasts Comforted

Elhanan Winchester was born in Massachusetts, USA, in 1751. He was raised in a Congregationalist setting but after a conversion experience he joined a Free Will (General) Baptist church in which he became a preacher. Winchester seems to have become gradually convinced of a High Calvinist theology in the vein of John Gill, and, after renouncing Arminianism, Winchester became a minister in a Calvinistic (Particular) Baptist church, first in Bellingham (Massachusetts) and then in Welsh Neck (South Carolina). Winchester originally came from a moderate Calvinist standpoint and only subsequently became convinced of the High Calvinism of John Gill, who believed that the Gospel should be preached primarily, or only, to the elect rather than to everyone indiscriminately. As suggested by Finn, it was his missionary zeal and the possibility of preaching repentance and conversion to all human beings that later made Winchester abandon High Calvinism. Winchester himself writes that he esteemed John Gill almost as an oracle, but at some point began to adopt a more open and general method of preaching as he found himself stirred up to exhort his fellow creatures to repent and believe the Gospel. Winchester points out, however, that he did not consider whether or not this was consistent with strict Calvinism.²⁵

After a friend of Winchester’s in 1778 brought the English edition of

²² Klein-Nikolai, p.176.

²³ Klein-Nikolai, p.177.

²⁴ Klein-Nikolai, pp.176-8.

²⁵ Elhanan Winchester, *The Universal Restoration: exhibited in a series of dialogues between a minister and his friend: comprehending the substance of several conversations that the author hath had with various persons, both in America and Europe, on that interesting subject, wherein the most formidable objections are stated and fully answered* (UR) (London: Gillet, 1788), pp.viii-ix.

The Everlasting Gospel to Welsh Neck, Winchester became more and more convinced of universalism. Later Winchester would make contact with the German Baptists of Germantown and he would write the foreword for a later edition of *The Everlasting Gospel* which he published in London in 1792. In the foreword to this edition Winchester notes that:

The system held out in the following pages appears to me the only one that in the least bids fair to unite the two great bodies of Christians, that have so long and so bitterly opposed each other, viz. those who assert that Christ died for all, and yet that there shall be but few, comparatively, that shall finally derive any saving benefit therefrom; and those who assert that all for whom the savior died shall indeed be saved, but that he died only for a few.²⁶

Winchester states that it seems highly unlikely that either of these sects would change their principles. The one charges the other with a lack of benevolence, while the other charges the one with lacking a proper view of the omnipotence of God. For a reconciliation to take place between these two opinions, it must be ‘on some middle ground where both may meet without giving up their favorite opinions’, says Winchester.²⁷ Such a middle ground is exactly what ‘the system of the Universal Restoration’ offers. As soon as the doctrines of Universal Restoration are accepted, says Winchester, it will bring reconciliation between the two opposing bodies of doctrines in Christian theology. In Elhanan Winchester’s time and context, the conflicting convictions fleshed out above were represented by Arminianism and Calvinism. In Reformed theology the opposition between an idea of some degree of freedom of the will to choose faith in the Gospel, and the idea that there is no such freedom, had become most explicit during the controversies on the views of Jacob Arminius (1560-1609) and the Remonstrants who shared his views on conditional election (the condition being foreseen faith) and the general scope of the atonement.

The main points of Arminianism, though maybe not exactly expressive of the views of Jacob Arminius himself, are often formulated along the following lines: (1) In spite of sin, human beings have the freedom to choose between belief and unbelief; (2) Human beings are never so controlled by God that they cannot reject the Gospel; (3) God’s election of the saved is prompted by His foreseeing that they will believe of their own accord; (4) Christ’s death did not ensure the salvation or the gift of faith to anyone, but created a possibility of salvation for all who believe; and (5) It rests with believers to keep themselves in a state of grace by keeping up their faith.

In response to Arminianism a synod was held in Dordrecht (the English name being Dort) in 1618-1619 by the Dutch Reformed Church, together with eight voting representatives from foreign Reformed churches.

²⁶ Winchester 1792, foreword to *The Everlasting Gospel*.

²⁷ Winchester 1792, foreword to *The Everlasting Gospel*.

Against the Arminians, the Synod of Dort formulated five points which would become known in English by the T.U.L.I.P. acronym. The acronym is perhaps most famous for its insistence on the unconditionality of election and the irresistibility of grace, coupled with its claim that the atonement was limited to the elect.

In the seventeenth century this debate became relevant for Baptists who formed separate denominations. On the one hand there were the General Baptists who followed the belief of the first English Baptists, John Smyth and Thomas Helwys (similar to the Mennonites), in a general atonement combined with a belief in the freedom of the human will to accept the Gospel and follow Christ. On the other hand there were the Particular Baptists who followed the Synod of Dort in holding to a limited atonement combined with a belief in irresistible grace.²⁸ It was these positions that Winchester sought to reconcile, using the universalist doctrines contained in *The Everlasting Gospel*. For Winchester, universalism offered a way of affirming the key principles of both High Calvinism and Arminianism in ‘one grand system of benevolence’, as he puts it in his dialogues on Universal Restoration.²⁹ This is not to say that Winchester necessarily had a very high view of theological systems. In his dialogues on universal restoration he even suggests that it is exactly because people have preferred systems to the simple truth of the gospel that they have thought it necessary to diminish the omnipotence or love of God: ‘O the mischiefs of bigotry, prejudice, and vain attachment to system!’³⁰. Even so, in *On the Outcasts Comforted* it is as a system of thought that universal restoration is thought to reconcile the conflicting bodies of theological doctrine. What Winchester proposes is an ecumenical system of thought. As Robin Parry notes, ‘the universalist system understood as a theological *via media* seemed to Winchester, perhaps somewhat naïvely, to have some ecumenical potential in bringing Calvinists and Arminians together.’³¹ That Winchester’s ecumenical hopes were really quite naïve is clear from the controversy that his views awakened.

Of course Winchester’s universalism was not seen by many as being very conciliatory – on the contrary. Winchester’s successor in Welsh Neck saw Winchester as ‘the means of dividing the Baptist Church’ in the city, while Winchester himself relates how he was treated with enmity by former friends.³² In the years following Winchester’s profession of universalism, he

²⁸ A leading proponent of Particular Baptist theology was the English Baptist pastor and biblical scholar John Gill (1697-1771) whose views are sometimes described as Hyper-Calvinism. Peter Toon, *The Emergence of Hyper-Calvinism in English Nonconformity, 1689-1765* (London: The Olive Tree, 1967).

²⁹ Winchester, *The Universal Restoration* II.A3 (chapter II, answer 3).

³⁰ Winchester, *The Universal Restoration* III.A10.

³¹ Robin A. Parry, ‘The Baptist Universalist: Elhanan Winchester (1751-97)’ https://www.academia.edu/8643336/The_Baptist_Universalist_Elhanan_Winchester_1751_97, accessed 24 November 2015, p.31.

³² Church records of Welsh Neck, Pee Dee, Sept. 5; Winchester, *The Universal Restoration*, p.xvii.

and his congregation would experience exclusion and marginalization from the broader evangelical community, which would eventually lead to the foundation of an independent Universal Baptist church. In 1782 Winchester addressed this issue in a sermon delivered at the University in Philadelphia. The sermon was later printed with the title ‘The Outcasts Comforted: A SERMON Delivered at the University in Philadelphia, January 4, 1782 To the Members of the BAPTIST CHURCH, who have been rejected by their Brethren, For holding the Doctrine of the final Restoration of all Things’. Winchester argues in the sermon that it is strange that the Universal Baptists are looked upon as heretics when they only affirm the doctrines already held by others:

I have often considered it with astonishment, that two ministers shall preach, and prove what they say from the scriptures, and neither of them shall be looked upon as holding damnable heresy, and yet we shall be looked upon as the worst of heretics by both of them, and all their people, for believing only what both of them put together have asserted.³³

Winchester’s attempt to reconcile Arminianism and Calvinism should not be confused with the so-called Middle-Way Calvinism which sought to avoid the doctrinal conflicts between the two, often simply by not mentioning the extreme positions. Rather, Winchester’s position takes in the extremes in a very explicit way and makes them part of a greater system. With Arminianism Winchester affirms that God loves all, while with Calvinism Winchester affirms that all the objects of God’s love will be saved. With Arminianism Winchester affirms that God desires all people to be saved, while with Calvinism he affirms that all God’s purposes will be fulfilled. With Arminianism Winchester affirms that Christ died for all, and with Calvinism he affirms that all for whom Christ died will be saved, so that the blood of Christ was not shed in vain: ‘One will declare that the blood of Jesus Christ was freely shed for all; the other, that his blood is infinitely sufficient to cleanse and purify all. This is what we believe.’³⁴

So then, how should we characterize Winchester’s position? Based on Winchester’s own claims, Robin Parry suggests that Winchester believed in a general atonement and universal salvation from early on, but suppressed these beliefs in order to ‘conform to the Calvinist theology he had been raised with’.³⁵ This does not, however, match well with Winchester’s other claims of having esteemed John Gill ‘almost as an oracle’, made in the foreword to the dialogues, and the fact that he joined the Calvinist Baptist church in Bellingham (Massachusetts).³⁶ According to Finn, Winchester believed in

³³ Elhanan Winchester, *The Outcasts Comforted. A sermon delivered at the University of Philadelphia, January 4, 1782* (Philadelphia: Towne, 1782).

³⁴ Winchester, *The Outcasts Comforted*.

³⁵ Parry, ‘The Baptist Universalist’, p.3.

³⁶ Winchester, *The Universal Restoration*, pp.viii-ix.

High Calvinism for a period, but ‘did not reject Calvinism for universalism, but rather rejected High Calvinism for Arminianism, though his commitment to universal penal substitutionary atonement encouraged him to eventually affirm universal salvation’.³⁷ Winchester only left the ‘revival-friendly Baptist evangelicalism of his early ministry’ for a similarly revival-friendly conversionistic or eschatologically conscious evangelical universalism.³⁸

But was Winchester an Arminian more than a Calvinist, as the above suggests? Hardly. Winchester describes the revelation of Christ’s love that converted him as compelling (‘a manner as constrained me’), so it seems that we are not here dealing with the Arminian freedom to choose between belief and unbelief.³⁹ The counsel of God shall stand and he will perform his pleasure, notwithstanding all the opposition that men can make, says Winchester, with reference to Isaiah (Isaiah 46.10). If God will have all men to be saved, as we hear in the first epistle to Timothy (I Timothy 2.4), and if God is determined to perform his pleasure and if nothing is impossible with God, as stated in Luke 1.37, then ‘is not the doctrine of the Restoration true?’ Winchester asks rhetorically.⁴⁰

God gets his will by inflicting pain on the human self in order to make it yield. In this way Winchester, along with Denck and Klein-Nikolai, affirms that God only punishes in order to correct: ‘Punishment to a certain degree, inflames and enrages, in a most amazing manner; but continued longer, and heavier, produces a contrary effect — softens, humbles, and subdues.’⁴¹ But God is love from the beginning, and his love towards human beings does not only begin in the moment that persons are converted. It seems that, for Winchester, when the love of God is revealed to a person it does not begin at that point but is simply made manifest.⁴² This looks like the idea of eternal justification (not to be confused with supralapsarianism, though apparently compatible with this idea) which can be found in High Calvinism, where the sinner is not redeemed in the moment of faith but from eternity, so that the moment of faith is only the point in time where the sinner realizes that he or she is already justified and redeemed from before creation.

It does not seem that Winchester dropped Calvinism for Arminianism, or that he was never really a Calvinist, but rather that he found a way to

³⁷ Nathan A. Finn, ‘The Making of a Baptist Universalist: The Curious Case of Elhanan Winchester’, Paper Presented to the Baptist Studies Group Evangelical Theological Society San Francisco, California November 16, 2011, p.12, https://www.academia.edu/4404295/The_Making_of_a_Baptist_Universalist_The_Curious_Case_of_Elhanan_Winchester, accessed 24 November 2015.

³⁸ Nathan A. Finn, ‘The Making of a Baptist Universalist’, p.15. Finn distinguishes this form of universalism from the non-conversionistic universalism of John Murray and others who believed that the general atonement of Christ was sufficient for saving all without conversion in this life.

³⁹ Winchester, *The Universal Restoration* III.A2.

⁴⁰ Winchester, *The Universal Restoration* III.A5.

⁴¹ Winchester, *The Universal Restoration* IV.A22.

⁴² Winchester, *The Universal Restoration* III.Q9 (chapter 3, question 9).

combine what he saw as the core principles of both. Winchester took in and kept Calvinism's belief in the sufficiency of the cross to redeem sinners and that God in his sovereignty will in the end get his will and save all the objects of his love. It was only the soteriological particularism of Calvinism that Winchester left behind as he embraced universalism and an Arminian method of preaching. The more precise way of characterizing Winchester's position would be that he was both a Calvinist *and* an Arminian, insofar as he simultaneously emphasized the sovereignty and omnipotence of God on the one hand and the love of God and the generality of the atonement on the other. In this he was not far from Hans Denck and Georg Klein-Nikolai.

Conclusion

The views described above were not new. Gregory of Nyssa argued in the fourth century that the perfections of God implies all His other perfections, since the opposite of one perfection can never be reconciled with other perfections.⁴³ For Gregory this meant that God's goodness and his righteousness are never exclusive but rather two sides of the same coin, and that all would eventually because of this be saved, not from but through death. It was this kind of theology which can be recognized later in, for example, the anonymous *Deutsche Theologie* – the fourteenth century anonymous work that influenced Hans Denck so much, and which seems to have had a greater impact on Protestant theology than has often been acknowledged.

The ecumenical potential in reconciling conflicting positions on the omnipotence and love of God and the freedom of human beings was noticed by theologians of different streams in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But, in a Protestant context, this tradition of thinking to a large degree originated in a (b)aptist setting. The future will show if baptists are capable of learning from this aspect of their tradition. This is not to say that all Baptists should suddenly turn soteriological universalists (something which is unlikely to happen, though miracles do occur, also among baptists), but rather that we can learn from the theological method of bringing together opposites in a larger whole as a way of reconciling conflicting convictions. This is not to say that we should at all costs construct complex theological systems, but rather that we may also have to learn to keep apparent as well as very real contradictions, paradoxes and conflicts alive without ultimately choosing the one pole over the other. That many modern Protestants have become better at respecting differences among themselves seems to be clear, but respect for differing opinions must not be confused with post-modern

⁴³ Gregory of Nyssa, *Orationes viii de beatitudinibus* IV, GNO 118-119.

relativism or subjectivism, but can just as well be seen as a particular theological method which can be found in the larger baptist tradition.

As Robin Parry remarks, one of the truly inspiring things about Winchester was his belief that Christians must debate with love and gentleness, and with an openness to being persuaded to change their views in the light of Scripture.⁴⁴ While Klein-Nikolai may have been more stern in his views, he too held an ecumenical hope. A similar hope seems to have been held by Hans Denck, who may have been even more cautious than Winchester in his attempts to avoid controversy and reconcile conflicting opinions. At the end of the day, what they all teach us is that insisting on God's love and sovereignty is not a bad way of overcoming doctrinal disputes, no matter what positions we may hold.

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⁴⁴Parry, 'The Baptist Universalist', p. 35.

Christianity, Covenant, and Nature

Annette Mosher

In this article I accept the challenge that Lynn White, Jr. proposed in his article ‘The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis’. After blaming Christianity for a theology of domination over the Earth, White claimed that we must either ‘find a new religion or rethink our old one’. In response I first outline the methodological issues that confuse White’s argumentation and cause the resulting backlash to his suggestion of living in peace with the Earth. Then, using scripture to rethink the stewardship theology usually offered by Christian theologians that is based on Genesis 1.28, I unpack the Earth covenant as found in Genesis 8. A traditional understanding of covenant theology enlarges the results of the Earth covenant for Christian theory and practice. The article ends by pleading for a new manner of living with the Earth that is based on relationship and empathy in place of domination or stewardship.

Key Words

Earth Covenant, Lynn White Jr., Environmental Crisis, Domination, Covenant Theology, Empathy, Relationship, Noah, Stewardship

Introduction

In the field of Christianity and environment it is rather amusing to note that awareness of the topic was introduced by someone who was neither a theologian nor an environmental scientist — although he analyzed both for his argument. Lynn White, Jr. was a professor of medieval history, hardly an area that would provide obvious answers for a modern environmental crisis. However, his 1967 *Science* article ‘The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis’ is widely recognized as the match that ignited the environmental debate within Western biblical Christianity.

White’s article begins by describing the technological progress of the Western world since the mid-1800s, and its resulting problematic effect of removing humans from nature. He argues that, as technology evolved, humans were able to master production of material goods and produce in a manner previously unimagined. Not only did this offer an ability to increase one’s own material well-being, but it also changed the human perspective of relationship with non-human nature from one of co-operation with to domination over. The result of domination over, White argues, brought environmental destruction and crisis.

Within this impetus to technological growth, White sees a deep, often uninvestigated, stimulant. He finds it no surprise that technological progress accelerated so quickly in the Western world. He argues that linear thinking was necessary for the forward growth and development motif embraced by science. It is the question of where the impetus for linear thought originated that caused White's article to provoke the Christian community. White argues that Christianity, with its creation story as the beginning and eschaton as the end, brought about Western linear thought.

Furthermore, White argues that linear thought within Christianity teaches that humankind was the final and glorious purpose of God's creation. Reading from a linear time perspective, White claims, it appears that non-human nature was created for the sole purpose of humanity's use and development. Additionally, the biblical account that humans were created in the image of God set them even further apart from the rest of creation and gave permission to the domination over problem. Burgeoning, environmentally-damaging technology, fuelled by use of non-human natural resources, is simply an end result of this linear development and progress of God's image bearers. This theology is so powerful that it is seldom challenged, even within the twenty-first century when environmental damage is readily discussed.

White names the problem and result; that is, technology = environmental damage. However, it is not the scientific issue that concerns him. Instead, he wants to address the ethical use of technology; furthermore, he wants to confront the thought and behaviour process behind the problem.

As an historian, White routinely analyzed examples of thought and behaviour processes. As a result, he was aware of the development process from sources of motivation to ensuing ethical behaviour. He states that ethical action is based on what we believe about our 'nature and destiny, that is, by religion'.¹ For White, since the historical majority religion of both Europe and the Americas (after colonization) was Christianity, all of Western scientific discovery and ethics carry the impact of the aforementioned Christian theology, even if one is not a practising Christian. Western culture is so imbued with acceptable social constructs that resulted from Christianity that we cannot escape its influence.

For this reason, White was not positive about the role of science alone to be able to resolve the environmental crisis. Since it was held worldviews that caused the situation, White argued that it was worldviews

¹ Lynn White, Jr., 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis' in Donald Van De Veer and Christine Pierce, *The Environmental Ethics and Policy Book* (Belmont: Wadsworth, 2003), p.55.

that must solve the problem. He believed that only finding a new religion, or reformulating our old theology — Christianity in the West — would change the behaviour that brings us to ecological disaster.² This suggestion, coupled with the stinging criticism that Christianity caused the ecological problem, was too much for most Christian theologians. However, what is often forgotten in the debate surrounding White and his ideas is that White's criticism came from within Christianity and not from without. He identifies himself as a 'churchman',³ even comparing himself to another well-known churchman of that time, Ronald Reagan. White was not claiming that we should 'throw the baby out with the bath water', but that even within Christianity there can be different ways to think about the human-nature relationship and we can learn from other religions, even though other branches of faith may be less familiar to us.

Unfortunately, it seems that White's critical explanation of the creation story became a red herring for the biblical theology that developed in answer to his argument. Christian theologians and scientists responded with theology that was also based on the creation story, but they placed the emphasis on 'stewardship' of creation rather than domination of creation. While White's criticism was that the creation story causes humans to try and transcend non-human nature, which leads to domination, his critics either ignored or missed his criticism and attempted to redeem the creation story of subduing the Earth by focusing on 'creation care' instead of dominion. This approach retained the problem of transcendence above non-human nature, human superiority, and linear time that White had criticized in the first place.

Additionally, the third part of White's article is hardly even recognized in the reactions to his proposal. However, it is here that White introduces the theme of relationship that is really the focus of his argument. This section also lessened his criticism of Christianity. In this part, White argues for 'An Alternative Christian View'. Here he turns back to being the historian and gives us the story of St. Francis of Assisi. White claims that St. Francis entered into relationship with animals as a rebellion against the medieval understanding of the superiority of humans. Francis was so unusual, White argues, that some within Christianity attempted to stamp out his memory, since it was threatening to the status quo of superior humanity as found in traditional Christian theology. As we know, however, the story of St. Francis not only survived, but has become revered within Western Christianity.

² White, 'Historical Roots', p.57.

³ White, 'Historical Roots', p.57.

In reading White, it is obvious that he not only wants respect for St. Francis but for others to follow the example of Francis. White is offering Christianity a Christian figure to follow, in the hope that this will make green theology more palatable. His criticism of Christianity as the vessel that brought environmental damage is a descriptive section leading to his problem solution. However, it appears that White chose the wrong methodology to deliver his message. In describing a biblical theological problem, he offers a historical image without competently dealing with the underlying biblical text that caused the disagreement. White lays the blame in the issue of anthropology from the first chapter of Genesis: ‘And although man’s body is made of clay, he is not simply part of nature: he is made in God’s image.’⁴ The image of St. Francis was not strong enough nor theologically influential enough to offset this seemingly foundational biblical account.

For this reason, the response to White’s argument by Christian theologians and practitioners using biblical text largely returns to the first part of Genesis. Stewardship theology took the critique of environmental damage seriously, but missed the real point of White’s argument. We can see that the anthropology argument became a red herring because ‘Earth care’ or ‘Godly conservation and use’ became the focus rather than the question of humanity as God’s creation along with the rest of creation; that is, humanity’s egalitarian position with the rest of nature. The role of the human as ruler or dominator over creation is not frequently questioned. Instead, argument is made for a more benign, aware ruler. This crux of White’s argument has largely been left unanswered, even though many attempts have been made.

In the remainder of this article, I will treat seriously White’s claim that we need to ‘rethink our old religion’⁵ in the hope that a different methodological approach may contribute to the ongoing discussion.

Let us travel a bit further

Because many of the responses come from biblical theologians, it is interesting that the discussion remains in the beginning of Genesis and does not travel further in the text. What is most noticeable is that the story of Noah’s flood is not fully explored in the discussion regarding stewardship of the Earth. Noah and the flood is a well-known biblical story. Beginning in Genesis 6 and continuing until Genesis 9, it is not theology that is

⁴ White, ‘Historical Roots’, p.56.

⁵ White, ‘Historical Roots’, p.56.

chronologically distant from the creation account. However, the commands differ a great deal between Genesis 1-4 and Genesis 6-9. Within the story of the flood we find a covenant that is usually overlooked, and which changes the Genesis 1 command to rule.

The Noah story begins with an account of human failure. Within nine generations after Adam and the command to rule over the Earth, the Earth was filled with corruption and violence perpetrated by humans. Here we see textual agreement with White's argument that humans pervert 'dominion over' to 'abuse of'. The situation was so dire that the biblical account records God as 'sorry' that humans were created. The scripture describes the problem as deep within humans — their hearts were evil. Since the Divine was angry with how humans 'ruled' the Earth, and with how violent humans became, the Divine determined to flood the Earth, killing all living things.⁶ However, one human, Noah, was righteous among the violent people. For this reason, he was instructed to build an ark that would deliver him, his family, and each kind of animal to safety. After Noah and his family accompanied the animals into the ark, the Divine caused rain to fall for forty days and forty nights, completely covering the Earth. The biblical account is careful to record that the flood waters covered the Earth for 150 days, and then the Earth began to dry. Then, at the Divine's command, Noah and the creatures with him left the ark in order to repopulate the Earth. The story continues that, in order to commemorate this event, the Divine placed the rainbow in the sky to signify that the Earth would never again be completely destroyed with a flood. This is commonly called Noah's rainbow.

This is an easily recognizable story; we teach this to our children in Sunday School. What is not regularly noticed, however, is that there is an additional part to the covenant story that is overlooked. It begins with Noah's ritualistic sacrifice after he leaves the ark. The biblical account tells us that, when the Divine smells the sacrifice offered by Noah, he says: 'Never again will I curse the ground because of human beings, even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood.'⁷ It seems that with the flood event the curse of the fall in relation to the Earth has literally been washed away. In this statement there is no ambiguity. God expressly names the ground in order to be clear that this promise only applies to the actual physical Earth. In order to keep us from reading this anthropologically and interpreting it as for humans or even animals, God

⁶ It is interesting to note that, while humans received the command to rule over animals, the biblical account declares that God would destroy not only humans but all flesh on Earth due to humanity's failure. There seems to be an understanding of a deep bond between animals and humans since humans were able to bring corruption into all created flesh.

⁷ Genesis 8:21, New International Version.

adds: ‘And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done.’⁸ The dual remark clarifies that God indicates a difference between the Earth — meaning the actual ground — and humans.

After this, God goes further to establish covenant with the Earth: ‘As long as the Earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease.’⁹ We see that the divine plan for the Earth is exclusive and exists separately from any plans for humanity or animals. Earth is no longer the playground for the human or only created for the human, but has a covenant and purpose of its very own. The rhythms of the Earth testify to God’s plan for this part of his creation, and the value of the Earth is for the glorification of God rather than the care of the human. It just happens that care of the human is also extended by the Earth as a merciful action of God.

What follows is also very interesting; perhaps mostly because it appears that we have misinterpreted it. As previously stated we understand the Noahic covenant made by God with all life on Earth as represented when we see the rainbow in the sky. However, when we see the rainbow, it is not the representation of the Noahic covenant; rather, it is the reminder of the Earth covenant. The Earth covenant is the reason for the Noahic covenant. What the rainbow really represents is the ‘covenant between (God) and the Earth’¹⁰ that was introduced in Genesis 8. However, when God sees the rainbow, he remembers the additional covenant he made with humans and animals. It is for the sake of the Earth that God does not destroy the rest of his creation, which would cause Earth to be a secondary victim and would violate the Earth covenant. It is the preservation and relationship of God and the Earth that is the protection for humans and animals.

In addition to the direct scriptural account, we have another sign that things have changed since the creation story. This is found within the command to the flood survivors. In Genesis 1.28 God said to humans: ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.’ But now the command to Noah is only: ‘As for you, be fruitful and increase in number; multiply on the earth and increase upon it.’¹¹ Here we see no further idea of domination or subduing as mentioned in Genesis 1. I argue that it is because humans were such a colossal failure

⁸ Genesis 8.21, New International Version.

⁹ Genesis 8.22, New International Version.

¹⁰ Genesis 9.13, New International Version.

¹¹ Genesis 9.7, New International Version.

— resulting in unrestrained violence — that God no longer entrusts us with that task.

Results

Perhaps one of the saddest events in modern Christianity, and the most catastrophic for life, is a lack of careful reading of this complete covenant. We can now see that White had a good argument. Instead of living with a sacred counterpart, Christians allowed themselves to be swept up into Platonic transcendentalism to such an extent that sacred relationship with God could only come on a transcendental level, while the biblical record of sacred relationship with God and the Earth became suspect because it was on the immanent level. As the image bearers of God, do not humans have a responsibility to image the new covenant between God and the Earth, rather than to image the replaced command given to Adam?

In this next section, I will attempt to sketch out what learning to live with sacred Earth may look like. To do so, I will continue with the concept given to us by God; that is, what covenant theology looks like when we think about our partner, the Earth.

Covenant

Steven McKenzie, in his book *Covenant*, lays out three important understandings that accompany a covenant: relationship, election, and community. While McKenzie only considers covenant from a Divine-human perspective, his general guidelines are useful in considering God's covenant with the Earth and our response. This area of human response is where we have lost the most ground, due to missing the Earth covenant, with disastrous results, as I have pointed out.

McKenzie rightly argues that, in establishing covenant, God is establishing and identifying the relationship between himself and the other party. We can see this most clearly when considering God's covenantal relationship with Abraham in Genesis 17.6-8. In this covenant God tells Abraham that the covenant that God establishes with him means that not only Abraham, but his descendants after him, will be in relationship to God. He will be their God. This becomes a personal, bilateral, and intimate relationship between God and Abraham. There is not an intermediary who brokers the arrangement or insures the obligation. Only God and Abraham are actors in the covenant. Even the descendants of Abraham are named directly and not addressed with Abraham as an agent or guardian. The covenant is made with each one of them — even though most are yet unborn — and the same relational position is retained. Each of Abraham's

descendants will have a personal relationship with God; that is, ‘I will be their God.’ If we question this idea of whether an intermediary can be involved in covenant we only need to consider the renewal of the covenant between God and Israel found in Jeremiah chapter 31, which specifically excludes an intermediary between God and the individual.

This first point can cause us some problems if we consider whether God is able to have covenant with the Earth. We are so used to thinking of Earth as a non-animate entity that we cannot imagine God and the Earth in relationship without humanity as a mediator. For God to have covenant with the Earth without human guardianship, according to our understanding of covenant, entails that the Earth is able to enter into a relationship with God herself. I argue that scripture is the identifier of the covenant and therefore our perspective is faulty regarding the Earth. Our perspective of the Earth as non-living or inanimate is challenged by God’s choice. However, there is a scientific, non-Christian theory that is closer to this account than our own theology. James Lovelock’s Gaia Theory states that the Earth is a living, reactionary system which works on its own to regulate its own systems and environment without interference by humans. This theory offers us an alternative view to our traditional stewardship theology.

The second aspect we note is election from God that is one-directional and personal. God told Abraham that he would be his God, and he would be the God of his offspring. Abraham was not the instigator of the covenant; this role belongs to God. Likewise, we see God electing the Earth for covenant. There is no action necessary on the side of the Earth. In fact, it appears that God chose to make covenant with the Earth simply because of the Earth’s being. In the covenant with Abraham there is a condition for Abraham and his offspring to uphold; that is, circumcision of all males within the covenant. There does not seem to be a corresponding requirement for the Earth in the Earth covenant. As long as the Earth exists, the covenant shall protect her.

What Now?

The acceptance of a God-Earth covenant brings us unease, even though it is scriptural in nature. Instinctively we ask how we are to live with the Earth if we do not have stewardship theology as a mediator. I am not sure we are completely at a loss. We know how to live with the sacred — that which is claimed by God in other areas of our life. Any religious adherent has ritual, tradition, or rules about the handling of sacred items.

McKenzie's third aspect of covenant, community, is also useful and a necessary concept. It is interesting to note that White instinctively asks for community between human and non-human nature at the end of his article. It seems to be the natural result of understanding God as the covenant partner with the Earth. What aspects or considerations about community are required when considering the Earth covenant? If we read further in scripture, we find that the Earth belongs only to God, just as the Israelites belong to God. In Exodus 19.5 he clearly tells the Israelites that the whole Earth is his. There are even parts of the Earth that they are not allowed to touch unless given special permission. However, these holy spaces enter into the experience of God meeting humans; that is, moments of community. This indicates that we must first recover the understanding of Earth as sacred and under the care and ownership of God rather than humanity.

The second recognition comes from the conditions of the covenant that we previously considered; that is, 'seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night'.¹² As I previously pointed out, this seems to replace the purity and faithfulness clause that is required of the Israelites, indicating that the Earth performs faithfully in providing food, environment, and rhythms. It appears that the Earth does her part to contribute to community by providing all that humanity needs for survival. When following the seasons and cycles of the Earth, humans receive those things that science has proven that humans need — rest, sleep, food, and purposeful work. What is remarkable is that these are all contributions that humans cannot control, and creation care almost sounds puny when considering Earth's rotation around the sun and its benefits to humanity. Recognizing the blessings provided by the rotation of the Earth — day and night, summer and winter — are not often topics within Christian theology. However, this appears to be the will of God, and we profit, albeit unconsciously for the most part, from the faithfulness of the Earth to her creator.

Humans have attempted to overcome these blessings rather than being thankful for them. When we think of developed technology that combats living in community with the Earth, such as light bulbs, atmosphere-controlled buildings, or year-round growing systems, we are aware that humans have accepted domination and subjection as the overriding perception. Critical changes in climate now demand that we gain a thankful spirit for the limitations as a blessing from God.

¹² Genesis 8.22, New International Version.

A Final Word

At the end of his work McKenzie offers two more ‘covenantal values’. They are obedience and social justice. Much could be added in the discussion of these. However, I would like to add two more Christian, and I believe biblical, virtues: awareness and empathy.

We find awareness of covenant throughout the biblical account. The awareness I am discussing is the attention to the things of God. In his covenant relationship with Israel, we see that Israel is often called to remembrance of the covenant, followed by the admonition that their God is a jealous God; mostly when Israel is apt to forget the covenant and follow other gods.¹³ Deuteronomy 6.9 tells us that awareness was so important that it should be posted on the doorposts and gates so that it was viewed whenever coming into the community. The covenant established deserves and even demands awareness of the special relationship and conditions. Likewise, the Earth covenant calls biblical Christians to remembrance and awareness of the special position of the Earth, now that God has established a covenant with her. Additionally, if we look at the conditions of the covenant and think about their implications, we find that we have further work to do.

This brings us to the issue of empathy. As a community we are used to the virtue of empathy towards others as a Christian virtue. It is encapsulated in Jesus’ teaching that ‘Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.’¹⁴ However, the idea of empathy towards the Earth is considered a ridiculous idea. It takes time for us to realize the implications of the Earth being a covenant partner with God. I have chosen empathy to give us an alternative to our behaviour since we are no longer stewards. In stewardship we are managers. We use the Earth according to our needs. However, when stewardship is removed, a vacuum is created. How can we live with the Earth without lording over it and returning to management?

Empathy requires that we live in relationship — horizontally — rather than in a vertical hierarchy with the Earth. It brings us an awareness that we only live because of the gifts given to us by the Earth. But it provides barriers at the same time. Healthy relationship forces us to realize that not everything is ours for the taking. We are allowed only that which we must have to live. There is the barrier of the other that limits us, just as in human relationships we are limited by the person of the other. Empathy also makes

¹³ See Exodus 20.5; Exodus 34.14; Deuteronomy 4.24; and especially Deuteronomy 6.15 which includes the Earth.

¹⁴ John 15.13, New International Version.

our actions more reflective and actual. We know how it would feel if someone were to break our bones, inject us with toxic poisons, or cut part of us away. Living in empathy with the Earth means that we do not do to the Earth what we would not want done to us.

Empathy also produces gratitude. When we can feel what the other feels, then we become grateful for what the other gives us. We no longer feel privileged and superior in taking what we want, but become aware of the cost of our needs to the other. Empathy with the Earth causes us to be grateful to the Earth, and it follows that, in spiritually healthy people, gratitude changes their actions toward the other from destruction to peace.

Conclusion

In this article I have reviewed the argument introduced by Lynn White, Jr. that claims Abrahamic religion and its understanding of dominion has led to environmental destruction. The argument has been made that, while White used faulty methodology in resolving his argument, his proposed solution, relationship, had value in Christian theology. I reviewed the Earth covenant and considered its implications for our theology from this perspective.

In solidarity with Lynn White, I argue that we need a radical, new approach to covenantal community, based on partnership with the Earth rather than stewardship. Current weather events have shown that the idea of humans subduing the earth is futile. Our behaviour has shown that the idea of Earth care falls short and is often ignored even by the community that should most recognize the Earth as God's very own. Perhaps it is time to recognize the covenant and reposition society and societal behaviours, at least within the Christian community, in order to reap the blessings of the covenant and to minimize the curses we have started to experience.

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‘Which Body?’ Before ‘Which Changes?’ Unearthing Differences Amongst Christians Considering Inherited Genetic Modification

Michael Peat

This paper begins by identifying Christian proponents of divergent views regarding the morality of human inherited genetic modification, in order to expose two features of the form of this debate: first, that it typically exhibits characteristics common to both Protestant and Catholic circles, and second, that it shares with the equivalent secular discourse a dominant underlying assumption that the welfare and dignity of future *individuals* is paramount. A more resolutely Christological approach to this issue recognizes that the *corporate* body of Christ, as described in I Corinthians 12, has determinative moral significance. In particular, I argue that the apostle Paul’s inverting of the hierarchical logic characteristic of Graeco-Roman appeals to the social body, achieved by insisting that the ‘weaker’ members of Christ’s body are ‘necessary’, offers theological grounds for an approach to the prospect of inherited genetic modification that is patient and alert to a broad range of contributions to the eschatological witness of Christ’s body. I argue that patient discernment involves careful attention to extensive testimony about the experience of living with potentially eradicable conditions. This has the aim of distinguishing conditions that are genuinely intolerable from ‘weaknesses’ that challenge prevailing predilections, in order to affirm the indispensable vocation of people whose lives exemplify the latter.¹

Key Words

Christian, Body, Inherited, Genetic, Modification

Turning the Top Soil: Empowering or Overpowering Future People?

Conflicting convictions about Inherited Genetic Modification (IGM) in Christian discourse come to light in the following criticism of one Christian ethicist by another.² In a paper pleading for Christians to move from what he

¹ An earlier version of this paper was given in November 2016 at the annual conference of the International Baptist Theological Study Centre in Amsterdam, the conference theme being ‘Conflicting Convictions’. I am grateful to the other participants at this conference for their helpful comments during the discussion that followed.

² As described in a study completed in 2005, ‘Human Germline Genetic Modification refers to techniques that would attempt to create a permanent inheritable (i.e. passed from one generation to the next) genetic change in offspring and future descendants by altering the genetic makeup of the human germline, meaning

calls the ‘tired debate’ about whether Christians should condone or condemn gene therapy as a matter of principle, Gerald McKenny challenges Gilbert Meilaender’s insistence that there is an insuperable moral difference between *somatic* and *germ-line* genetic modification of human beings, responding that:

Meilaender's objection emerges from a consistent principle of respect for the person implicit in his account: medicine should focus on treating the person with the disease; it should not be used either to eliminate the person with the disease, as in the case of selective abortion, or to eliminate the disease from humanity, as in the case of Germ Line Therapy. However, it is unclear that there is anything wrong *per se* with aiming to eliminate diseases from humanity as a whole. Surely Meilaender would not find either the smallpox vaccination or the Tay-Sachs screening programs objectionable, yet in both cases humankind or a significant subset thereof was the object of an intervention aimed at eliminating a disease from humanity.³

The dispute here between Meilaender and McKenny reflects alternative convictions that are recurrent amongst Christians concerned with IGM. On the one hand, there are those convinced that the measure of pre-emptive control over the inheritable traits of future persons offer (albeit with qualifications) positive means to *empower* them; for others, any such control inevitably *overpowers* them. Where Meilaender is convinced of the latter, McKenny argues that Christian deliberation on this matter should shed such alarmism, focusing our energies instead on other issues which risk inhibiting the potential of IGM genuinely to empower future generations. McKenny suggests these issues include assessing reasonable risks and benefits, as well as ensuring proportionate allocation of resources to genetic research, just distribution of its benefits and adequately informed consent to its application.

eggs, sperm, the cells that give rise to eggs and sperm, or early human embryos.’ Susanna Baruch, Audrey Huang, Daryl Pritchard, Andrea Kalfoglou, Gail Javitt, Rick Borchelt, Joan Scott and Kathy Hudson, *Human Germline Genetic Modification: Issues and Options for Policymakers* (Washington, DC: Genetics and Public Policy Centre, 2005), p.9. Quoted in Ronald Cole-Turner, ‘Religion and the Question of Human Germline Modification’, in Ronald Cole-Turner (ed.), *Design and Destiny: Jewish and Christian Perspectives on Human Germline Modification* (Cambridge, MA & London: MIT Press, 2008), p.17. However, I agree with Celia Deane-Drummond that ‘inherited genetic modification’ is preferable to ‘germline genetic intervention’ because the former encompasses a broader range of technical possibilities. For the purposes of this paper, ‘inherited genetic modification’ also has the benefit of focusing attention on the controversial *effect* of these interventions (rather than simply that they act on the human germline), i.e. that they introduce a modification that, being inherited, would become an indelible part of the ensuing person’s life from the outset. Celia Deane-Drummond, ‘Freedom, Conscience and Virtue: Theological Perspectives on the Ethics of Inherited Genetic Modification’, in Cole-Turner, *Design and Destiny*, p.196. Hereafter, I will normally use the acronym ‘IGM’ when referring to inherited genetic modification.

³ Gerald McKenny, ‘Religion and Gene Therapy: The End of One Debate, the Beginning of Another’, in *A Companion to Genethics* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p.289. McKenny is responding to claims made in Gilbert Meilaender, ‘Mastering Our Gen(i)es: When Do We Say No?’, *Christian Century* 107 (1990), pp.872-5. In contrast to ‘germline’ or ‘inherited’ genetic modifications, ‘somatic’ genetic modifications are interventions that will only affect the existing individual to whom they are applied.

He also suggests we aim to develop methods that minimize, and if possible remove entirely, harm to embryos and resultant offspring.⁴

So far, I have highlighted this controversy with reference to Protestant scholars. More recently, the British Catholic ethicist David Jones has proffered a more elaborate case for objecting to all IGM on similar grounds to those rather more generally stated by Gilbert Meilaender. Again, this case arises from dissatisfaction with a prevalent moral evaluation of IGM, in this case in the official pronouncements of Jones' own Catholic community. Although Jones would rather say the *lack* of moral evaluation, for in his view Catholic teaching in this area suffers from a dearth of serious scriptural and theological attention to prospects for genetic intervention. Rather, it repeats widespread concerns about the safety implications of innovative genetic technologies, combined with its long-standing insistence both on the inviolability of the embryo from conception and the illicitness of the requisite *in-vitro* fertilization that abstracts procreation from a couple's sexual union.⁵ Consequently, Catholic documents attending to reproductive biotechnology (e.g. *Donum Vitae*) seem, in principle, open to strictly therapeutic possibilities arising from IGM. But, Jones complains, what has not been thought through in Catholic circles to date are the peculiarly God-like pretensions of applying genetic interventions that *future* generations will inherit. For Jones, the problem is that IGM would not just be alleviating the symptoms of any particular person (living now or in the future); their intervention would be qualitatively different because they would effect a deliberate change *before* conception, thereby determining *which* people will come into being at all.⁶

I do not intend to comment on the strength of Jones' case, or indeed that of anyone else I have mentioned so far. My purpose here is simply to highlight the manner in which conflicting convictions concerning IGM emerge in Protestant and Catholic circles alike. I propose that across this ecumenical spectrum, two overarching characteristics can be detected as these differences are expressed. Firstly, we may note a shared fundamental purpose underlying the dispute. For all their difference, the common goal of these theological interlocutors is to delineate the proper scope of exercising

⁴ McKenny, 'Religion and Gene Therapy', p.299.

⁵ David Albert Jones, 'Germ-line Genetic Engineering: A Critical Look at Magisterial Catholic Teaching', *Christian Bioethics* 18:2 (2012), p.130.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 136-141. It is worth noting that other Catholic scholars have criticized other aspects of Catholic teaching regarding human genetic research. Where Jones highlights a lacuna in recent Catholic moral instruction, Thomas Shannon questions its continuing assumption that an embryo should be treated as a person from conception, arguing that fertilization should instead be regarded as a process, with personal status being assigned later, once biological individuality is assured. He therefore presses for an evaluation of foreseeable genetic technologies along similar lines to those proposed by McKenny. Thomas Shannon, 'The Roman Catholic Magisterium and Genetic Research: An Overview and Evaluation', in *Design and Destiny*, pp. 51-71.

responsible stewardship through biotechnological control of human bodily life. As we have seen, this task has been undertaken by mounting arguments for refusing IGM on principle as usurping God's prerogative, a concern underlying the familiar clarion call to refrain from 'playing God'. It has also been grounded consequentially in concern that physical, psychological or social harm may be done because IGMs will exceed our predictive knowledge or collective moral resources. But the question wrestled with is essentially the same: 'How can we distinguish [responsible] innovation from (sinful) transgression? Or how can we tell the *creative* transgression of the given from *immoral* transgression?' ⁷ Although different contributors acknowledge it to differing degrees, the challenge of this question, in any form, is compounded by the way sin operates through self-justification and rationalization, leaving our perception of a good intention continually vulnerable to deception.⁸

Secondly, as we have seen, there are Protestant and Catholic ethicists for whom IGM is intrinsically objectionable, but in both cases their objections are dissonant with the majority of official denominational declarations on this topic. Official church statements are typically concerned with potential *consequences* of implementing IGM in the foreseeable future, rather than with *intrinsic* objections to IGM as such. Having surveyed a variety of official denominational statements, from the World Council of Churches to the Southern Baptist Convention to Vatican declarations, Ronald Cole-Turner observes that what is implicitly shared across them all is an insistence that any IGM 'must be for therapeutic rather than enhancement purposes.'⁹ In view of the widely shared concerns these statements echo about uncertain long-term effects, the likelihood of increasing social disparity, and prejudice against those already living with disabilities, the constraints they uphold may in effect rule out all IGM permanently. But nevertheless, they typically do so for reasons that relate to deleterious consequences rather than by claiming that IGM is inherently wrong.

These considerations dominate the landscape of Christian discussion of IGM. But, I suggest, they do not fully plumb the depths of theological

⁷ Nigel Biggar, 'A Methodological Interlude: a Case for *Rapprochement* between Moral Theology and Moral Philosophy', in *God, Ethics and the Human Genome: Theological, Legal and Scientific Perspectives* (London: Church House Publishing, 2009), p.120.

⁸ Brent Waters, 'Christian Ethics and Human Germ Line Genetic Modification', *Christian Bioethics* 18:2 (2012), p.179.

⁹ Cole-Turner, 'Religion', p.15. Cole-Turner admits that substantiating a precise distinction between 'therapeutic' and 'non-therapeutic' or 'enhancing' interventions is problematic. For discussion of the difficulties faced by attempts to draw this distinction, see Allen Buchanan et al., *From Chance to Choice: Genetics and Justice* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp.104-155; Erik Parens, 'Is Better Always Good? The Enhancement Project', in Erik Parens (ed.), *Enhancing Human Traits: Ethical and Social Implications* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1998), pp.1-11.

considerations that should be unearthed for Christians considering medical innovations like IGM. In drawing attention to it, I have so far only 'turned the top soil'. The majority of Christian arguments I have brought to light so far are, essentially, a continuation of the same kind of discussion that is typical in mainstream secular bioethics. That is, they seek to consider future benefits in the light of convictions about the dignity of existing individuals demanding protection, the needs of society being conceived in terms of its ability to ensure inclusive access to medical innovation. In doing so, they mimic the modern penchant for a 'fixed properties approach to nature ... that truncates the concept of nature by leaving out sociality'.¹⁰ For all that Christian appeals for the recognition of intrinsic moral problems with IGM offer counter-posing reasoning, they too tend to be primarily concerned with the welfare of individual persons. In both cases, legitimate concerns are raised, to which the resources of Christian moral reflection have much to offer.

However, I suggest that there is a more fundamental issue that lies deeper than the debate to be found in the metaphorical 'top soil' of Christian discourse about IGM. This issue, if unearthed, can furnish us with a more resolutely Christological starting-point for engaging with its possibilities. I contend that before they start pondering whether, and if so which, changes to the genetic constitution of present and future people fall within the scope of legitimate human creativity, Christians should consider *which body* has determinative moral significance. This question paves the way for an approach that offers an alternative point of reference, albeit without necessarily being in conflict with every contention focused on the welfare of individuals. This alternative is grounded in Christianity's anthropological claim that the *corporate* body of Christ is ontologically fundamental and therefore the source of criteria for interpreting human flourishing, rather than claims about our wellbeing as psycho-physical individuals forged apart from this context. Thus, when determining how to respond to what is given in human bodily life, 'the issue is not primarily the nature of the body as *corpus*, but the witness of the *ecclesia* into which it is inserted'.¹¹ The discussion that follows imagines that IGM technologies could be developed that are safe, effective and cause no harm to embryos, either in research or application. Proceeding on this hypothetical basis will allow us to focus on the implications of this alternative point of reference, but does not imply that the significant difficulties that safety considerations continue to pose can be underestimated.

¹⁰ Lisa Sowle Cahill, 'Germline Genetics, Human Nature, and Social Ethics', in Cole-Turner, *Design and Destiny*, p.154.

¹¹ Joel Shuman, *The Body of Compassion: Ethics, Medicine and the Church* (Oxford and Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), p.89.

Digging deeper: The Body of Christ as Normative

So, let us dig deeper. According to Robert Song:

Within Christian theological ethics much of the discussion about the ethics of genetic therapy and enhancement has left the body bereft of adequate *theological* narration. As a result the body has been treated as if naturally given, a status that leaves it open to construction in terms offered by the ruling ideologies of a secularized world.¹²

On the face of it, Song's complaint recalls Jones' observation about Catholic teaching regarding IGM. But Song has in mind a quite different lacuna: For him, it is not the fact that IGM entails choices that determine the bodies of individuals yet to be conceived. Rather, it is that Christian bioethical debate typically embraces the conventional conception of human bodily life as, first and foremost, the life of an individual whose *telos* can thus be conceived in individualised terms. In doing so, it remains unmindful of the Gospel reality that the body that has ultimate, and thus normative, significance for us, is the corporate body of Christ, whose nature and future is decisively shaped by the life, death, and eschatological promise of the risen Jesus: 'Thinking about genetic manipulation is therefore not a matter of conjectures about the nature of the body at the general resurrection, but of reflecting on the nature of the resurrection life that the church is to exhibit.'¹³

The inspiration for Song's insights into the implications of this for bioethics is Dale Martin's compelling analysis of the apostle Paul's treatment of the body in his letters to the Corinthians. For Martin, Paul's conviction that '[t]he Christian body has no meaning apart from its participation in the body of Christ' is key to understanding his argument for the *bodily* resurrection of believers, against sceptics in Corinth.¹⁴ Its radical implications are likewise revealed in Paul's subversive account in I Corinthians 12 of the structure of this corporate body — Christ — in which we participate. On the one hand, Paul dismisses as 'foolishness' any speculation about how our resurrected bodies will be transformed.¹⁵ Nonetheless, God's salvific agency in Christ and the Spirit's gathering of the Church enables us to share in an anticipatory 'common life in which the restoration of the covenant is at work', a community seeking to witness to the Spirit's ongoing work of overcoming all alienation so as to renew human relationships and reconcile us to God.¹⁶

¹² Robert Song, 'Genetic Manipulation and the Body of Christ', *Studies in Christian Ethics* 20:3 (2007), p.415.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.418.

¹⁴ Dale Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), p.131.

¹⁵ I Corinthians 15.35-49. New Revised Standard Version.

¹⁶ John Webster, *Holiness* (London: SCM Press, 2003), p.62.

At a pivotal moment in I Corinthians 12, Paul says: 'Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.'¹⁷ This verse introduces Paul's explanation of the differentiation and interdependence of roles in the church (apostles, prophets, teachers, and so on), an explanation whose force derives from Paul's preceding generic description of God's arrangement of the diversified members of the body. Our mutual recognition that we depend on each other is crucial to this account, and to that extent reflects Paul drawing on the familiar tradition of Graeco-Roman rhetoric about the social body.¹⁸ But having co-opted this tradition, Paul then scandalously inverts it, refusing the invitation to leave it as a device to endorse the prevailing status quo by insisting that:

...the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this.¹⁹

Song draws several telling implications for human genetic technologies from Paul's account of the body of Christ in Corinthians. Some of these resonate with concerns raised in what I earlier called the 'top soil' of Christian discourse about IGM, although here they find a firmer theological ground. For Song, the importance Paul places throughout I Corinthians on careful use of our bodies entails our rejection of any contemporary gnostic tendencies which 'treat the body as indefinitely plastic, or that regard the body as something to be separated from and opposed to the self.'²⁰ Paul's insistence on the bodily resurrection of the dead because Christ has been raised, requires that 'Christians will oppose any practices that foster cultural denial of human finitude and mortality, or symbolize a pre-empting of the decisive divine transformation of their bodies.'²¹ Furthermore, Song recognizes that the arrangement of the body as described in I Corinthians 12 requires that:

Any social practices or behaviours which are intended or are likely to promote the social or economic advantage of some Christians over against others, or to exacerbate inequalities that lead to breakdown in fellowship, are to be greeted by calls to adopt the apocalyptic values of the reign of God.²²

This last stipulation may prove an impassable moral obstacle for many foreseeable IGM interventions when considered from a Christian perspective. Several commentators offer disheartening assessments of the predominance of market forces in healthcare systems (the United States

¹⁷ I Corinthians 12.27.

¹⁸ Martin, *Corinthian Body*, p.94.

¹⁹ I Corinthians 12.22-4.

²⁰ Song, 'Genetic Manipulation', p.418.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.419.

²² *Ibid.*, p.418.

being a common illustration), in the light of which new genetic therapies are liable to become another conduit for the indulging of competitive tendencies.²³ These evince the likelihood of widening inequality, as the more prosperous access biotechnological resources that increase their own and their descendants' power compared to others, and further entrenchment of an impulse to pursue biological 'solutions' to the neglect of engaging seriously with the social causes of suffering.²⁴ These exemplars of 'the "more afraid than hopeful" camp', as Baptist ethicist David Gushee calls them, substantiate Gushee's own scepticism about the distribution of future biotechnological innovation, including genetic therapies:

Overall, I find myself more afraid than hopeful. In theory this is a very close call. In the gritty reality of global capitalism and politicians-for-hire and an unjust health care system and an economically stratified world, the smoke clears a bit.²⁵

Unfolding Vocation: Arthur's Call and the Primacy of Patience

The apostle Paul emphasizes that the body of Christ is diverse, and *must* be diverse for the effective exercise of its witness to God's eschatological reign. That message in itself has an important bearing when formulating a Christian response to the 'fatal attraction to normalizing' that readily finds expression in contemporary biotechnological aspirations.²⁶ But I suggest that the radical reversal of convention in Paul's vision of the social body in I Corinthians 12 encourages us to take a further step. Martin's analysis of Paul's reasoning again provides the prompt. He notes an ambiguity in the Greek term for 'necessary' (*anagkaia*), which Paul uses when saying that 'the members of the body that seem to be weaker are *indispensable*'.²⁷ Graeco-Roman conventions about the social body tended to emphasize how especially necessary the ruling classes were for social cohesion. In other words,

²³ For example: Sowle Cahill, 'Germline Genetics', pp.157-162. In a similar vein, Michael Sandel gives examples of overbearing 'hyper-parenting' which seeks to answer 'a competitive society's demand to improve our performance and perfect our nature', suggesting that the degree of anxious compulsion these demonstrate offers a presentiment of the competitive ethos likely to govern the appropriation of further 'improving' biotechnological options. Michael Sandel, *The Case against Perfection: Ethics in the Age of Genetic Engineering* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p.61. See the discussion on pp.45-62.

²⁴ Sowle Cahill, 'Germline Genetics', p.145 and p.157.

²⁵ David Gushee, *The Sacredness of Human Life: Why an Ancient Biblical Vision is Key to the World's Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), p.367.

²⁶ The title of an essay raising concerns about the propensity to coercion that the author believes inheres in an influential theory of healthcare for which restoring 'normal functioning' is the primary goal of medical intervention. Anita Silvers, 'A Fatal Attraction to Normalizing: Treating Disabilities as Deviations from "Species-Typical" Functioning', in Parens, *Enhancing Human Traits*, pp.95-123 (see especially the discussion on pp.110-115). For an analysis of modern medicine's normalizing tendencies as exposed by Michel Foucault's genealogy of 'biopower', and the lineaments of a Christian alternative, see Gerald McKenny, *To Relieve the Human Condition: Bioethics, Technology, and the Body* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997), pp.199-209 and pp.217-226.

²⁷ I Corinthians 1.22.

'necessary' is a corollary of *high* status. However, Paul applies 'necessary' to the weaker members conventionally deemed of *low* status, unsettling conventional status claims so as to suggest that their significance is only superficial:

Through his play on words, Paul both admits and denies the low status of the weaker members of the body. ... Paul's argument may be confused – it certainly is confusing – but the end result is clear: the conventional attribution of status is more problematic than appears on the surface; the normal connection between status and honor should be questioned; and we must recognize that those who, on the surface, occupy positions of lower status are actually more essential than those of higher status and therefore should be accorded more honor. This is not, then, a compensatory move on Paul's part, by means of which those of lower status are to be compensated for their low status by the benefaction of honor. Rather, his rhetoric pushes for an actual reversal of the normal, "this-worldly" attribution of honor and status. The lower is made higher, and the higher lower.²⁸

Thus, when the parameters of bioethical enquiry are prescribed by the logic of the Christological social body, it becomes clear that respect and care for the 'weaker' members of society are by no means comprehensively realized just by ensuring that poorer members are not shortchanged in the distribution of new biotechnological developments (even if this could realistically be done). It requires us to recognize that there are 'weaker' members of society who play a necessary role that should be valued as such, precisely by virtue of those qualities of theirs conventionally deemed 'weak'.

Earlier in I Corinthians, Paul identifies the 'weak' as the object of God's choosing; indeed, 'God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are.'²⁹ As David Ford has rightly observed in relation to this verse: 'If God chooses 'things that are not' then these [people with disabilities that can be detected prenatally] are signs of 'not being', communities of the sorts of people whose abortion is widely encouraged.'³⁰ As such, not only are they to be recognized as those whom God loves for their own sake and equips with their own vocation, but also that the image of God in humanity is more fully realized to the extent that we value fellowship with 'weaker' members, with no incentive other than that their presence and purpose is God-given, thereby embodying 'a sign of this humanity and this God'.³¹

²⁸ Martin, *Corinthian Body*, pp.95-6. Martin explains that under the terms of Paul's metaphor, the 'weaker members' are probably a reference to the genitals, the 'necessary member' being a recognized euphemism for the penis.

²⁹ I Corinthians 1.27-8.

³⁰ David Ford, *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p.359

³¹ Ibid., p.369. See also Webster, *Holiness*, p.97.

To insist that neighbours with genetic conditions widely regarded as disabilities have a divine calling to be honoured is to identify them with a formal truth claim applicable to all people. A growing body of literature, conspicuously the writings of Jean Vanier and others involved in the L'Arche community, traces aspects of the content of these vocations as they have been perceived in the stories of particular people with disabilities. One recent example is Frances Young's profound reflections on what, after years of intellectual, spiritual and emotional wrestling, she is convinced is the *necessary* vocation that her severely disabled son Arthur has within the body of Christ, as the person he is. Necessary, so that this corporate body's 'wholeness' can be rightly apprehended: not as a state that has erased signs of loss and brokenness, but rather because 'our wholeness in Christ is a wholeness that can absorb and transfigure loss, brokenness, disability, failure, sin, hurt and death', that bears marks of impairment just as the resurrected Jesus appeared with the marks left by his crucifixion.³² Necessary, because the intense frustration of thwarted plans and hopes that accompanies daily commitment to people with severe learning difficulties challenges the so-called 'abled' to face the disturbing reality of their own violent and selfish tendencies, and thereby enter 'the process of being broken, moulded and renewed in God's image'.³³ Necessary, in sum, as a witness to more authentic human values that a culture preoccupied with economic success and self-possessed independence prefers to ignore. Decades of both struggle and joy found in the intimacy of daily life as Arthur's mother has led Young to a deep sense that people with severe learning disabilities may have a vocation to facilitate a 'shift in values' towards appreciating that:

What really makes us human is the capacity to ask for help ... The "gift of the unlikely givers" is "the capacity to ask for help." It's not simply that the strong help the weak; rather, those like Arthur reveal our common essential vulnerability as human creatures, and demonstrate that [the] fruits of the Spirit are both divine gift and at the same time truly human values.³⁴

The title of Young's personal reflections on life with Arthur speaks of her 'journey of faith'. Ford suggests that realizing our *imago dei* by loving people for their own sake, including 'the sorts of people whose abortion is

³² Frances Young, *Arthur's Call: A Journey of Faith in the Face of Severe Learning Disability* (London: SPCK, 2014), pp.148-9. Young notes several characteristics of people with severe learning disabilities, like Arthur, which give cause to identify them with the 'weaker' members in Paul's account of Christ's body in I Corinthians 12. As we earlier observed, Paul is speaking here of body parts we tend to cover up to avoid embarrassment, prompting Young to point out that '[p]ersons with severe learning disabilities still provoke reactions of embarrassment, and they are the least powerful people in our society, usually dependent and lacking autonomy, with little control over their circumstances.' Ibid., p.149.

³³ Ibid., p.146.

³⁴ Ibid., pp.143-4. The fruits of the Spirit, listed in Galatians 5.22, are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

widely encouraged' entails 'friendship in a covenant community' wherein their names are honoured and their stories are told.³⁵ Both authors' descriptions point to indispensable prerequisites for discerning vocation, in ourselves and others. Firstly, they underline the importance of recognizing that since the Spirit of God directing creation towards its telos is the Spirit of the crucified Christ, the various vocations through which that Spirit furthers this goal may well assume forms that subvert conventional expectations of what counts as 'progress'.³⁶ In the field of genetic medicine, this entails acknowledging that there are quite proper limitations preventing us from reaching definitive conclusions about whether any given biological abnormality warrants removal as a 'defect' unfit for God's new creation, as the loaded language of 'mutation' tends to imply.³⁷ Secondly, their language brings into relief the crucial role of *time* in the discernment of vocation: time for personal stories to be told and pondered; time for careful and honest reflection about the place and possibilities of oneself and others; time to discover the profound effect of relationships; time to listen to God speaking through all these processes.³⁸

It is in the nature of IGM to remove or modify aspects of the genetic substructure of a person's life before revealing features of his or her life-story have begun to emerge. This fact may not necessarily require that any and all conceivable IGM interventions be rejected. But taking seriously the corporate body of Christ, with its emphasis on the *necessity* of 'weaker' members, as the proleptic telos of human society and thus the starting-point for bioethical reflection, should prompt us to recognize the extent to which IGM developments present a temptation to impatience. This is particularly the case where contemporary patterns of thought shape a culture inclined to be impetuous in technological matters, lacking the cultural resources needed to differentiate patience from procrastination. In my view, the benchmarks for human fellowship set by the body of Christ may permit interventions in highly circumscribed circumstances, involving conditions which accumulated testimony has shown to be drastically life-limiting, extremely painful and conducive to despair rather than to signs of vocation.³⁹ But if we

³⁵ Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, p.359.

³⁶ Colin Gunton, *The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), p.188.

³⁷ Brian Brock, Walter Doerfler, Hans Ulrich 'Genetics, Conversation and Conversion: A Discourse at the Interface of Molecular Biology and Christian Ethics', in John Swinton and Brian Brock (ed.) *Theology, Disability and the New Genetics* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), p.156.

³⁸ Robert Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.301. See also the discussion in Douglas Knight, 'Time and Persons in the Economy of God', in Francesca Murphy and Philip Ziegler, *The Providence of God* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2009), pp.131-143.

³⁹ I am thinking of conditions which can be confidently detected prenatally, and which would be comparable to the restrained circumstances that Nigel Biggar proposes for assisted dying: 'situations where living human beings are rendered permanently incapable of responding to a vocation, whether by severe

are to sustain the task of distinguishing conditions that are genuinely intolerable from ‘weaknesses’ that challenge us, we will need continually to acknowledge our need for, and trust in, that divine grace which lives like Arthur’s can help us to recognize, and which the fellowship of the body of Christ exists to embody.

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brain damage, or by intense pain that cannot be relieved so as to permit the recovery of responsible life, generously conceived.’ Nigel Biggar, *Aiming to Kill: The Ethics of Suicide and Euthanasia* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2004), p.114. Intervening to prevent autosomal dominant conditions such as Huntingdon’s disease may fall into this category.

Book Reviews

Bruce W. Longenecker, *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty and the Greco-Roman World* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), ISBN 978-0802863737

Canadian theologian Bruce Longenecker tackles the intriguing question of whether Paul was as concerned for the poor as Jesus was. Most scholars, who have studied the issues of poverty and justice, as well as the economic dimensions of the early church, usually do not refer to Paul, as they mistakenly believe that he had little regard for the poor.

Longenecker addresses this issue in detail in his book *Remember the Poor*. He gets the title from Galatians 2.10, where at the end of the Church's first major theological crisis Peter and others reminded Paul and Barnabas that they were to remember the poor in their ministry to the Gentiles. Longenecker uses history, economics, biblical exegesis, writings of the early Church Fathers, and theology to make the case that caring for the poor was integral to Paul's gospel and was standard practice in the 'Jesus groups' that he founded. This multidisciplinary approach is one of the strengths of the book.

Longenecker divides the book into two sections. In the first he discusses the socio-economic context and society's attitudes towards the poor in the urban contexts where he established Jesus groups or to those to whom he wrote letters. In the second section he discusses in detail who the poor were within the Jesus groups and Paul's attitude towards them. Using social historical analysis of the first century, Longenecker estimates that about eighty per cent of the population lived at a subsistence level or in poverty.

Longenecker provides extensive detail to show that care of the poor was a vital part of Paul's theology and what he expected in the communities of Jesus followers he established. He follows that up with evidence from Scripture that there was care for the poor in the communities of Jesus followers that Paul established. So the conclusion is that, while Paul did not devote whole sections of his letters to teaching about the poor and how to address poverty, it is evident that he was very concerned about the poor and their plight. Longenecker writes:

Paul's letters dealt with matters that were situationally urgent; if those letters are silent with regard to care for the poor, we still need to ask whether that is a reflection on Paul's own theology or whether, in fact, care for the poor was being observed without compromise in the Jesus communities...

Longenecker finally ties this into Paul's theology of the 'body' characterized by various individuals in I Corinthians 12 and Romans 12. This has to do

with the stronger members of the body taking care of the weaker. He concludes by saying – not communism, not charity, but community.

Longenecker then moves to the very critical question of whether the generosity was directed to only members of the Jesus groups. Paul is very clear as to what the ideal should be. In Galatians 6.10 he states, '*Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.*' In I Thessalonians 5.14-15 he stresses the need to help the weak and then to strive to do good for each other and everyone else. So, while the reality of the limited resources focused the assistance within the Jesus groups, the ultimate focus was always to be beyond that.

The one major weakness of Longenecker's argument is that he uses a predominantly economic model to define poverty. Present understandings of poverty use multi-dimensional models of poverty that include indicators such as marginalization, powerlessness, voicelessness, and isolation. Using such models, for example, would have explained the status of slaves who according to some estimates constituted about one quarter of the population within the Roman Empire. Slaves do not fit into standard socio-economic models. It would also explain more clearly the difference between citizens who were poor and were entitled to help from the State and the Roman elite and non-citizens who were poor and not entitled to any help.

While Longenecker makes a robust case that Paul was concerned for the poor, he only marginally discusses the theological arguments on which the concern for the poor is based – namely, the Kingdom of God and the righteousness of God. Longenecker's thesis is:

For Paul, economic assistance of the poor was not sufficient in and of itself, nor was it exhaustive of the good news of Jesus; but neither was it supplemental or peripheral to that good news. Instead, falling within the essentials of the good news, care for the poor was thought by Paul to be a necessary hallmark of the corporate life of Jesus-followers who lived in conformity with the good news of the early Jesus movement.

Remember the Poor fills an important gap in understanding Paul's theology and is the first serious academic analysis as to whether Paul was concerned about the poor. In the light of the present global refugee crisis and as churches are wondering what their role should be, it would be worthwhile to read *Remember the Poor* to understand that for Paul the Good News was not just forgiveness of sins, but its reality was expressed by caring for the poor and those on the margins of society.

Reviewed by Rupen Das

John Fletcher, *Preaching to Convert: Evangelical Outreach and Performance Activism in a Secular Age* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2013), ISBN 978-0472036523

In this book John Fletcher, Associate Professor of Theatre at Louisiana State University, analyzes a variety of American-based evangelical outreach activities. These activities include Door to Door and Street Evangelism, Hell Houses, Creation Museums, and Campaigns to change the orientation of Homosexual people.

Fletcher's approach is to analyze these activities from the perspective of performance studies. As a consequence, he argues that such activities are an expression of 'performance activism'. That is, he places these activities within the broader social context of a wide range of public performance events, such as protests and demonstrations, that are intended to bring about change in the actions and allegiances of those whom they reach. While such events are usually associated with the liberal left he argues that, from the perspective of performance studies, such performance activism can embrace a large number of ideological commitments.

This approach by Fletcher allows him to be generous in his analysis of activities that many may naturally and initially disregard. Indeed, for personal reasons Fletcher himself, who is not an evangelical, would be ideologically opposed to some of the messages that such events communicate. From a performance perspective, however, he can view such activities as a way in which the evangelical Christian Church is seeking to maintain a public voice in an increasingly secular and pluralistic society. He also praises the commitment and dedication of those who participate in such events, with their clear goals to bring about actual change. This clarity of goal is something which he argues more liberal expressions of performance activism can struggle to own or articulate.

The above said, Fletcher is not uncritical of these evangelical performances either in terms of content or of style. To some extent, given his perspective, it could be said that his criticism at times relates primarily to the way in which they are poor performances for the type of message and change which they are trying to bring about. As a consequence, Fletcher suggests that large and attractive staged evangelical events can 'make the Truth or Idea they promulgate too attractive, too easy' and 'substitute for an authentic encounter with or conversion to a way of life'.

I find this a fascinating book. It is well written, engaging, informative, and interesting. Fletcher's analysis gives an alternative way of understanding evangelical activities. On the one hand, this may help those outside of the Church understand them better as a socio-political practice. On the other hand, it may encourage those within the Church

to examine their own activities in a new way. Fletcher does tend to analyze some of the more extreme expressions of American evangelical activities. Hell Houses were a new one to me. The reader also needs to be ready to grasp and accept the validity of a performance analysis. This is an approach not without its limitations and difficulties. Yet, I would argue that this is a quite valid approach and indeed Fletcher's book sits within a developing body of literature that finds performance a helpful category with which to analyze a wide range of human activity, including the religious.

Reviewed by Stuart Blythe